Written Assignments and Dissertations in Distance Learning within the TESOL Context

Guest editors:
Christine Calfoglou, Anastasia Georgountzou, Alexia Giannakopoulou, Athanasios Karasimos, Ifigenia Kofou, Polyxeni Manoli, Maria Stathopoulou, Kosmas Vlachos, Makrina Zafiri, Vasilios Zorbas
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Challenges in ESP/EAP Teaching at a Greek University: ‘Inter-scientificity’ in interdisciplinary fields.
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Distance education has fast become, from an alternative option for anyone wishing to pursue academic studies (at undergraduate or postgraduate level) on a part-time basis or at a distance to a viable and entirely competitive tertiary educational route that prioritises meeting the needs of different students while making the best of current ICT infrastructures. Among the elements that render distance education possible, written work, in the form of assignments and dissertations, is probably one of the cornerstones of distance education, not merely because it contributes to the grading of students’ academic progress, but more importantly because it can prompt students’ critical reflection and essential engagement with the subject matter.

The tenth issue of RPLTL is a celebration of the elements that make written assignments and dissertations carried out in the distance learning mode a unique aspect of distance education. We have invited the tutors of the M.Ed. in TESOL of the Hellenic Open University (HOU) to reflect on, carry out and present original research on the role and impact of written assignments and dissertations in distance learning, as perceived and experienced within the context of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. The issues that are raised refer to matters as diverse as the form, function and content of academic assignments, the role of feedback in students’ written work, the role and impact of research in written academic work and the importance of carrying out academic research for teachers’ professional development.

Due to the complex nature of the matter, this special issue has been divided into four main sections. The first section is titled «Academic writing» and presents students’ perspectives on academic writing in distance learning within the TESOL context (Manoli, Zafiri and Zorbas), tutors’ perspective on academic writing (Karavas and Zorbas), research on dissertation abstracts (Hatzitheodorou) and a passionate reflection on the true nature, scope and mission of the academic writing genre (Calfoglou). It also includes an extensive review of Sword’s book on Stylish Academic Writing.

The next section focuses on feedback on academic assignments. The section kicks off with a very interesting, informative and informing interview that Christine Calfoglou took with Professor Dana Ferris and goes on to address concerns such as the interface between feedback, assessment and written assignments distance learning (papers by Tsagari and by Kofou), the intricacies of tutor feedback in distance education (papers by Karagianni and by Maliotaki), and students’ perceptions of it (papers by Kreonidou and Kazamia, by Peroukidou and Kofou and by Trigonaki). There is also a paper on the fascinating dimension of peer feedback in distance education (Georgountzou and Calfoglou).
Section 3 addresses the link between written work (i.e., assignments and dissertations) and research. In this section, we read about many diverse issues in this regard, such as how research feeds into written assignments (Kollatou), the different processes and practices involved in the assessment of language learners (Gorgogeta and Vlachos), the effect of online technology, like Moodle, toward EFL teachers’ professional development (Theohari), implementations of specific practices in EFL context (Hasogia and Vlachos), insights on developing and implementing research tools in dissertations (papers by Gidarakou and by Peroukidou), as well as a research paper on HOU M.Ed. in TESOL students’ perspectives about the impact of various distance learning processes and practices on their learning and professional development (Kofou). The final Section addresses the more idiosyncratic aspect of integrating written work within the different thematic modules of the M.Ed. in TESOL and linking it to the actual classroom and contains two papers, both exploring the impact of written assignments on student teachers’ practices (papers by Glava and Stavraki and by Kataropoulou) and the other.

The issue is rounded up with two more papers that fall outside the realm of the special issue and refer to the impact of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) on EFL oral production (Paschalidou) and the interplay between of interdisciplinarity and “inter-scientificity” in ESP and EAP (Nikolarea).

Nicos C. Sifakis
Editor-in-Chief
Special Issue on

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS AND DISSERTATIONS IN DISTANCE LEARNING WITHIN THE TESOL CONTEXT

Section One:
Academic writing

Guest Editors: Polyxeni Manoli, Makrina Zafiri, and Vasilios Zorbas

Introduction

Academic writing is closely linked to scholarship in all its facets, from writing books, essays and dissertations to carrying out research and other academic assignments. One of the major stumbling blocks, however, for young scholars in graduate programs today is mastering the techniques of this skill, especially when they are writing for a targeted and informed audience. The conventions that are traditionally adopted by experienced academic writers have been debated for many years confusing young scholars even more. On the other side of the pendulum, there are some young scholars who come into the scene with hordes of experience in the area having penned many papers over the years. Others have logged in quite a few papers during their studies, while a good number have not made much progress beyond exams and weekly assignments. The situation becomes even more daunting when one is summoned to fine-hone their academic writing skills in a foreign language while pursuing graduate work in a distance learning environment, predominantly due to insufficient vocabulary knowledge and the absence of frequent face-to-face cooperation. Though there is a plethora of research on academic writing in the greater vicinity of the academic world (predominantly in brick and mortar institutions), very little research has been carried out to date in the context of foreign language pedagogy and distance learning, particularly with respect to Greek TESOL distance learning environments. This special issue seeks to fulfill this void by featuring research which blends academic writing with distance learning education.

The first two articles, namely, Greek students’ views on academic writing in distance learning within the TESOL context and Academic writing in distance learning programs: The tutors’ perspective, probe into the attitudes and perspectives of both students and tutors toward academic writing in
distance education offering many suggestions on how to best tackle the problem. More specifically, the first article explores the views and challenges of Greek adult learners pursuing a postgraduate degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) through a distance learning program at the Hellenic Open University (henceforth, HOU). While the participants delineate the major problems they normally face when structuring an academic assignment (e.g., in-text citations and bibliographic referencing, plagiarism, language problems, lack of explicit guidelines on behalf of tutors or conflicting feedback from different faculty members), they, also, point to specific practices they believe would help them improve as writers (e.g., tutor assignment feedback and explanation, a guide or even a training course in academic writing skills, extensive practice in assignment writing, personal involvement in research on academic writing). The second article focuses on the multiple benefits and problems of academic assignment writing as perceived by the tutors of the Course Design and Evaluation module offered through the MA in TESOL program at the HOU and concludes with suggestions for effective student preparation and training in academic writing.

The third article, A preliminary genre-based analysis of M.A. dissertation abstracts written in a Greek TESOL distance learning environment, delves into researching a specific genre which plagues the writing of many young scholars; namely, the MA dissertation abstract. Using Swales’ (1990/2004) CARS (Create a Research Space) model for the analysis of introductions of research articles, the author analyzes fifty MA dissertation abstracts from former HOU graduates in order to examine how MA students structure their texts and project their stance.

The fourth article, Academic writing: Conformity and beyond - A brief note, centers on offering “words of wisdom” to novice writers adopting a more esoteric stance. Grounding the discussion in the relevant literature, the author traces her experiences from the time she wrote her doctoral dissertation (where she picks up the thread of her argument) all the way to her current status as an experienced tutor at the HOU offering sage advice to young scholars based on the lessons she learned (albeit the hard way) throughout the course of her academic life.

The concluding article is a multiple book review essay on Helen Sword’s Stylish Academic Writing (2012). The main argument of this book is “elegant ideas deserve elegant expression” taking on a different trajectory than the dominant stance toward academic writing, which normally construes this type of writing as verbal deadwood and stilted.

Polyxeni Manoli, Makrina Zafiri, and Vasilios Zorbas
The aim of this study was to explore the views and challenges of Greek adult learners pursuing a postgraduate degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) through a distance learning program at the Hellenic Open University. The data of the study were gathered through narrative research/inquiry, a form of qualitative research, in particular, through the personal narratives of students. They were analyzed through the thematic analysis method, according to which they were coded and segmented into themes or categories to help researchers make sense out of the text data. According to the findings of the study, it was revealed that almost all participants regarded academic writing as a complex, challenging and difficult skill that can be improved through practice and guidance. According to the students of the specific research, the major problems they faced were: in-text citations and bibliographic referencing, plagiarism, language problems, lack of explicit guidelines on behalf of their tutors or conflicting feedback from different faculty members. Concurrently, students referred to specific practices which would help them improve their academic writing, such as the tutor assignment feedback and explanation, a guide or even a training course in academic writing skills, extensive practice in assignment writing, personal involvement in research on academic writing.

Σκοπός της παρούσας μελέτης ήταν η διερεύνηση των απόψεων και των προκλήσεων των Ελλήνων φοιτητών, οι οποίοι διεκπεραιώνουν μεταπτυχιακό δίπλωμα στη διδασκαλία της Αγγλικής γλώσσας σε ομιλητές άλλων γλωσσών (TESOL) μέσω προγράμματος εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση στο Ελληνικό Ανοικτό Πανεπιστήμιο. Τα δεδομένα της μελέτης συγκεντρώθηκαν μέσω της αφηγηματικής έρευνας, μιας μορφής ποιοτικής έρευνας, και συγκεκριμένα μέσω του τύπου προσωπικών αφηγήσεων των φοιτητών. Αναλύθηκαν μέσω της μεθόδου της θεματικής ανάλυσης, κωδικοποιήθηκαν και ταξινομήθηκαν σε θεματικές ή
κατηγορίες για να βοηθήσουν τους ερευνητές να κατανοήσουν τα δεδομένα των κειμένων. Σύμφωνα με τα ευρήματα της μελέτης, αποκαλύφθηκε ότι σχεδόν όλοι οι συμμετέχοντες θεωρούσαν την ακαδημαϊκή γραφή ως μια περίπλοκη και δύσκολη δεξιότητα που μπορεί να βελτιωθεί με εξάσκηση και καθοδήγηση. Επιπλέον, με βάση τα λόγια των φοιτητών, οι παραπομπές στο κείμενο και οι βιβλιογραφικές αναφορές, η λογοκλοπή, τα γλωσσικά προβλήματα, η έλλειψη σαφών κατευθυντήριων γραμμών εκ μέρους των διδασκόντων ή η αντικρουόμενη ανατροφοδότηση από διαφορετικούς διδάσκοντες ανήκαν στις μεγάλες δύσκολιες που αντιμετώπιζαν. Παράλληλα, οι φοιτητές αναφέρθηκαν σε ορισμένες πρακτικές, όπως η ανατροφοδότηση και η επεξήγηση από τον διδάσκοντα, ένας οδηγός ή άλλος εκπαιδευτικός, οι παραπομπές στο κείμενο και οι βιβλιογραφικές αναφορές, η εκπαιδευτική εξάσκηση στις εργασίες, αλλά και η προσωπική συμμετοχή στην έρευνα για την ακαδημαϊκή γραφή, οι οποίες θα μπορούσαν να τους βοηθήσουν να βελτιώσουν την ακαδημαϊκή γραφή.

Keywords: academic writing, distance learning, TESOL

1. Introduction

One of the biggest challenges for many young scholars today is fine-honing their academic writing skills during the course of their studies in higher education institutions. These challenges, however, are further compounded when the individuals, assuming the role of the learner, are adults, with a complex lifestyle and a set of pre-determined learning experiences who have embarked on a distance learning graduate program. While there is a plethora of research on academic literacy in brick and mortar institutional settings, very little work has been carried out to date in distance education learning environments, especially in Greece. This study seeks to fill that void in this area of inquiry by probing into the views and challenges of Greek adult learners pursuing a postgraduate degree through a distance learning program in TESOL.

2. Academic literacy in (distance) education

Most of the research in academic literacy is grounded in the work of the New Literacy Studies movement (Street, 1984; Gee, 1990; Barton, 1994) which not only did it not construe the term literacy as a “unitary concept” but it further challenged the assumption that the mastery of a particular set of cognitive skills could be applied to any given context and discipline indiscriminately. Their theoretical assumption is that literacies are “[…] cultural and social practices […]” which “[…] vary depending upon the particular context in which they occur […]” (Lea 2004, p. 740). Working within this theoretical framework, the emerging Academic Literacy movement (Jones et al., 1999; Lea & Stierer, 2000) probed into more specific contexts of higher education and particularly investigated the gap between instructors’ and students’ understanding of writing for assessment within a higher education setting. Further research on academic literacies branched out from this point on and had been carried out in a multitude of other settings as well: in brick and mortar institutions (Lea & Street, 1998), in distance learning environments (Stierer, 1997; Lea, 1998), and with “non-traditional” students (Lea, 1994; Lillis, 1997; Ivanić, 1998). The methodology adopted by most of these researchers subscribes to the interpretivist/constructivist (qualitative) research paradigm, mostly due to the nature of the work inherent in these studies.
However, a relatively recent study (Lear & Prentice, 2016) which is directly related to this paper was carried out in distance learning programs in Australia and centered on self-regulating learning among first year international students and specifically on the manner with which students to whom English is a foreign language grapple with the complex demands of academic writing as they pursue undergraduate work in online programs. Throughout this research the authors probed into ways this student population maximizes the use of distance learning/online programs as independent learners in order to develop the requisite academic literacy and mastery of the English language which will in return help them throughout their undergraduate studies. By understanding how these students learn in such environments, the researchers believe that they will be able to make wiser choices about the use of technology to support this student population with respect to academic literacy also affecting curriculum planning and design.

Putting academic writing into practice, however, is anything but a smooth sailing. From a plethora of studies in the greater vicinity of academic literacy (Stierer 1997; Lea & Street, 1998; Lea, 2004; Dysthe, 2007; Panourgia & Zafiri, 2009; Zorbas 2014; Zafiri & Panourgia, 2011; Zorbas 2014), one can delineate the major problems many students face in their effort to weave together the strands of their research projects into coherent texts which subscribe to the conventions of academic writing:

a. **Educational experiences and prior beliefs about teaching and learning.** Some scholars (Kember et al. 2003, Laing et al. 2005) argue that our former educational experiences as well as our pre-conceived notions on teaching and learning impact the manner with which we grapple with the multifaceted demands of academic writing. For instance, students who have been immersed in a highly teacher-centered and exam-oriented learning environment would give prominence to the final written exam as a more efficient and valid assessment tool and “downplay” the value of academic assignment writing all together.

b. **Minimum training in the conventions of academic writing.** Plodding through one’s course requirements in higher education institutions and completing all required assignments does not lead to the mastery of academic literacy. According to Lea (2004), academic literacy involves high-level argumentation as well the mastery of the appropriate language in order to convincingly bring forward one’s arguments -a skill which requires rigorous training and is by no means developed automatically. Part of the learning experience as well as the socialization process for students in higher education is developing the required academic discourse and fine-honing the necessary academic writing skills in order to survive and succeed in their studies. Regardless of the one’s subject area, academic writing remains one of the greatest hurdles and, thus, as Mullen (2001) states, students need to undergo a productive, systematic and well-designed rigorous training in academic writing that will help them change their perceptions as non-writers and immerse them into its complexities.

This is an area that severely plagues higher education in Greece and has handicapped many of our students, regardless of whether they attend brick and mortar institutions or pursue academic work through online programs. The focus of this paper is on the views and challenges of Greek adult learners pursuing a graduate degree in TEFL through a distance learning graduate program at the Hellenic Open University.
3. Methodology

3.1. Research questions

Allowing for the purpose of this study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How do Greek students perceive academic writing in distance learning within the TESOL context?
2. What challenges/difficulties do students face when they are engaged in academic writing?
3. What good practices do students report?
4. What still needs to be done to help students improve academic writing?

3.2. Research design

The data of the study, as aforementioned, were gathered through the narrative research/inquiry, a form of qualitative research, which “[...] provides researchers with a rich framework through which they can investigate the ways humans experience the world depicted through their stories [...]” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 3). It is regarded variously as a “story,” a “mode of knowing” and a “method of inquiry” that contributes to knowledge communication and meaning construction (Barrett & Stauffer, 2009, p. 7). In particular, it has spread to educational research focusing on collecting individual stories and reporting teachers’ and students’ experiences/views in actual educational settings offering practical and specific insights (Creswell, 2011). More often than not, narrative researchers probe into the experiences of one or more individuals in actual educational settings asking them to present orally or in writing their individual stories on their learning experiences and retell the story that may include the characters, setting, problem, actions, and resolution. These stories, also called field texts, constitute the raw data, which researchers analyze identifying themes or categories to retell/narrate the story that emerges by organizing the key elements into a sequence (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2000; Creswell, 2011). In this way, this information brings researchers closer to the actual practice of education.

More specifically, the data of this study were collected through the type of personal narratives of students (Casey, 1995/1996; Creswell, 2011). The researchers, allowing for the aim of the present study, asked students to voluntarily present, in writing, their learning experiences and views on academic writing, as it was experienced in a Distance Learning program in the TESOL context.

3.3. Setting/Participants

The participants of the study were postgraduate students of the MA program ‘The Teaching of English as a Foreign/International Language’ at the Hellenic Open University. The aim of the program is to boost English Language, Literature and Philology graduates’ professional development as teachers of English as a foreign and as an international lingua franca by involving them in theoretical and practical studies in the domain of language teaching methodology, according to the demands of the current local and international labor market ([https://www.eap.gr/en/courses/417-the-teaching-of-english-as-a-foreign-international-language/5053-the-teaching-of-english-as-a-foreign-international-language-starting-from-the-academic-year-2017-2018](https://www.eap.gr/en/courses/417-the-teaching-of-english-as-a-foreign-international-language/5053-the-teaching-of-english-as-a-foreign-international-language-starting-from-the-academic-year-2017-2018)). The studies last for three years approximately, while the program ECTS credits are 120. Eight second-year and third-year students attending module 67 ‘Teaching English to Young Learners’ participated in the study. Participants were all female, aged between 25 to 50, who came from various regions of Northern Greece and
belonged to different socio-economic status.

3.4. Data analysis

The data of the study, the field texts, were analyzed through the thematic analysis method (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011). As with all qualitative research, the data can be coded and segmented into themes or categories to help researchers make sense out of the text data (Creswell, 2011). Namely, the researchers studied the data several times until they reached a coding of the most salient information according to the aims of the study; they focused on specific data and disregarded other data that did not provide evidence for the pertinent themes following an inductive process of narrowing data into a few themes (Creswell, 2011). The results of the study are presented in the next section, where excerpts from students’ texts also appear to provide rich data and an objective interpretation of students’ experiences and views on academic writing in Distance Learning within the TESOL context.

4. Results

4.1. Students’ perception of academic writing

According to the findings of the study, it was revealed that almost all participants regarded academic writing as a complex, challenging and difficult skill that they need to master, as they admitted that they had not been engaged in academic writing during their undergraduate studies, acknowledging, though, that it is a skill that can be improved through practice and guidance. In particular, one student stated: “When I entered this program I realized how different and difficult it is to write in an academic style. I found it quite difficult since I have never dealt with such a thing during my studies in university”. Another student mentioned: “[a]cademic writing cannot be seen as a simple process of placing one’s thoughts in writing, as with other narrative discourse types. Academic writing is a constant struggle of striking a balance between what has been already voiced by renowned researchers and adding something novel to the field. Undeniably, of course, this is an art to be mastered”. Similarly, “[a]cademic writing does not constitute a reproduction of other writers’ ideas and suggestions, but it should be a critical evaluation of the topic based on the resources studied”. According to another student’s words: “[a]cademic writing is a process that all students are able to improve when their weak points are identified and properly addressed”.

4.2. Aspects of academic writing according to students’ views

Regarding the aspects of academic writing, it was shown that almost all students considered language to be highly important for academic writing. Namely, most of them viewed the appropriate use of language and vocabulary as a critical parameter of academic writing pointing mainly to formal language and writing (e.g., use of third person, passive voice, gerunds, subjunctive). A student wrote: “[a]n important aspect of academic writing is language. This is the most important asset of the assignment, as it allows the reader to understand the central idea of the assignment with the minimum amount of cognitive effort”. Another one mentioned: “[a]cademic writing has to do with formal language and (formal) writing (e.g., the use of the passive voice and the avoidance of the first personal pronoun)”. Allowing for another student’s words, “[t]he language used in an academic writing should be carefully chosen in order to promote explicitness and coherence. Formal language should be used in academic writing by avoiding colloquial language or
abbreviations”. At the same time, it was found that half of the students considered reference use and citation to be a significant part of academic writing. A student stated: “[d]ocumenting views through in-text citations is an important convention of academic writing”. Another student highlighted: “[a]cademic writing includes a set of rules in terms of appropriate organization of references [such as, direct quotation and paraphrasing][...] the provision of evidence to support their views appears to be essential. Students should integrate their resources into the written text in a way that they acknowledge another writer’s contribution expressing at the same time their own viewpoint”. In a similar manner, another student mentioned: “[a]part from the text itself, attention should be paid to paraphrasing and citing the references used”. Moreover, a couple of students referred to the proper structure that their assignments should follow. For example, “[...]the text should have a clear structure and be divided in meaningful paragraphs. It should also be coherent and reader- friendly”. According to another student’s words, “[...]the term does not only apply to the proper language use but also to the proper structure of the written text’.

4.3. Student challenges in academic writing

According to students’ words, they faced many difficulties when they were involved in academic writing having mainly to do with in-text citation and bibliographic referencing, plagiarism, language problems, lack of explicit guidelines on behalf of tutors or conflicting feedback from different faculty members. More specifically, most students reported that reference use and citation were the greatest challenges in academic writing. One student stated that: “[b]ibliographic referencing and in-text citations have been difficult to handle; it took me the whole first module to fully understand the importance of supporting my arguments through references that were rather recent”. Similarly, “[f]inding evidence to support all my claims was hard and reading all these articles to find the ones I could use as references was even more tiring”. Another student wrote: “[c]orrectly citing sources, writing a thesis statement and elaborating on ideas were common problems faced in almost every assignment”. Allowing for another student’s words, “[a]nother thing that was demanding and time-consuming was to learn how to cite the list of sources I have used”. Simultaneously, the specific difficulty was inextricably linked to the issue of plagiarism by some students. Namely, one student mentioned that: “[t]he writing process is often a long road of false starts, hesitations, endless corrections, whereas the danger of plagiarism is always there [...] confusion about how to cite correctly can result in plagiarism”. According to a student’s words, “[a]nother thing that I should have had in mind was the matter of plagiarism. Any claim should have been based on appropriate justification, which came from studying the relevant literature and the work of experts in the field”. Furthermore, a couple of students referred to language problems, as they were asked to be engaged in academic writing in a foreign language, which poses extra difficulties. For instance, “[...] it is not easy to be asked to use academic writing in a language that is not your mother tongue”. Another one explained: “[w]hen I have to write an assignment I want to have a wide variety of vocabulary, which sometimes results in the wrong choice of words after using a dictionary. Also in an effort to paraphrase different theories, I choose more informal words that usually come in my mind”. Moreover, another difficulty mentioned by half of the students had to do with the lack of explicit guidelines on behalf of the tutors or the conflicting feedback coming from different faculty members. For instance, one student stated: “[a]fter all, nobody explained it to me. Most of the tutors expect that we already know how to use such a writing style. But nobody taught us how to write an academic assignment not even at university”. Another one pointed out: “[t]here was conflicting feedback from different faculty members. There was lack of a particular guide followed strictly by the consultant of each module. More specifically, in many instances different consultants had different
opinions about specific matters concerning the writing of the assignments, which quite often caused confusion’. According to another student’s words, “[m]y tutors’ guidelines regarding the way my assignments had to be written seemed unjustifiably contradictory, as each tutor seemed to explain academic writing from their own point of view”.

4.4. Good practices according to students’ views

Concurrently, students referred to some practices, such as the assignment feedback, tutor explanation, practice in assignment writing, personal involvement in research on academic writing, which helped them improve academic writing. In particular, some students considered that the assignment feedback and tutor explanation during the sessions played an important role in their improvement in academic writing. For example, it was mentioned: “[t]he assignment feedback throughout the years has been an immense help and a point of reference”. One student replied: “[e]xamples and explanations during the sessions helped a lot”. Another student stated: “[t]he input and guidance received from tutors regarding academic writing and its complexities and conventions are deemed to be an invaluable source of information”. Some students also referred to their personal involvement in research on academic writing and practice in assignment writing that helped them improve. For instance: “[m]y personal research on academic writing throughout the web helped me understand and improve it. The assignment writing also served as a base to evolve and adapt my own writing by using proper sentencing, adopting the type of syntax that facilitates the message conveyance and the proper outline of the assignment that improves cohesion”. Another one reported that: “[t]his year I suppose I have become more mature and so has my writing. I have overcome all the difficulties concerning formatting and my only challenge now is to write something worth writing. I got the hang of it and writing in the APA style comes naturally’. Similarly, “[w]hat I found really helpful in order to improve my skills in academic writing was to read a lot of relevant to the topic sources and always keep notes of the most important parts that would fit into my assignment. I have used dictionaries and Thesaurus in order to find synonyms so as not to repeat the same words all the time”. According to another student’s words, ”I believe that laborious, extensive reading of articles or books, continuous study of APA style formatting and working on structural elements, such as building one’s arguments through daily exercise, are practices that are bound to improve one’s academic style of writing, certainly not overnight but steadily enough”.

4.5. What needs to be done to help students improve their academic writing skills

In addition, the results of the study demonstrated that most of the students highlighted that explicit and appropriate guidelines were necessary to help them ameliorate academic writing. One student mentioned: “If we were provided with the right guidelines, I am sure our writing skills would improve”. Another student suggested the creation of a writing guide on behalf of the tutors/affiliation to be used as a reference point throughout their studies when need be. For instance: “I strongly think that HOU should create an organized writing guide in which all the details referring to how written assignments should be structured could be included. Moreover, it should be strictly followed by all the consultants as well as the students and it should be the first thing distributed to the students when they first enter the program”. Simultaneously, a couple of students proposed that special seminars/training courses should be organized by the HOU to assist students in coping with academic writing. “I strongly recommend that HOU provide a training course in academic writing skills for all postgraduate students at the beginning of the program so that we are better prepared for our assignments”. 
5. Discussion

This research probed into the views and challenges of Greek adult learners who were pursuing a postgraduate degree in TESOL through a distance learning program at the Hellenic Open University.

Allowing for the first research question, the results of the study revealed that most of the students regarded academic writing, in a foreign language, as something which does not come naturally but as a process which needs hard and meticulous word. It isn’t enough to merely ‘know’ the foreign language ‘well’ to be able to write academically, it is “[...] an art to be mastered [...]”, as one student, in this study, put it. Students with a sound grasp of English as a foreign language realize that academic writing entails devotion, very much like a long winding and tedious path, which they need to follow to become successful writers. It is, as Lear and Prentice (2016) put it, a form of self-regulating learning. They realize that academic writing is not a simple amalgamation of their work with the work of other authors. This realization becomes even more challenging for HOU students, who are the so-called non-traditional students (Ivanić, 1998). In other words, they are students who are not studying in a ‘conventional’ Greek University. They must strive hard and ‘dig’ into information and knowledge on their own, a process which is both lonely and difficult and needs self-discipline to achieve.

The second research question, which probed into the difficulties and/or challenges students faced when they were engaged in academic writing, raises the issue of what academic writing is or should be for both students and university lecturers. It seems that the students who participated in this study are confused with the concept of academic writing, in the sense that they feel their tutors/lecturers all seem to have a different definition of academic writing. The aforementioned is in line with similar research conducted by Jones et al., 1999 and Stierer 2000, who found that there is a clear-cut gap between instructors’ and students’ understanding of what writing for assessment is in higher education. Students link academic writing, which is partly correct, only to in-text citations and bibliographic referencing, plagiarism, language problems, lack of explicit guidelines on behalf of their tutors (see also Wagenmakers 2009), or conflicting feedback from different faculty members. The students who took part in this research seem to fear a blank piece of paper which hasn’t, yet, been filled in with ‘words of wisdom’ (see also a similar research conducted by Maharshi, 2008), which will show the depth of their knowledge upon the subject which they are studying. They fear making mistakes, weaving the new knowledge into the old (see also Dysthe 2007), or producing errors which will ‘cost marks/grades’, even though it is well known that we learn from our errors and mistakes (see Corder 1967; Ferris 1999; James 2013). They also fear plagiarizing unintentionally. As one student, very successfully, put it “[t]he writing process is often a long road of false starts, hesitations, endless corrections, whereas the danger of plagiarism is always there [...] confusion about how to cite correctly can result in plagiarism””. But even plagiarism is something they need to be taught. Students should train themselves to avoid plagiarizing the work of others, in other words they should be able to know when and how they appropriate “[...] authorship and ownership of [a] text” (Pennycook, 1996:201), or even when they are self-plagiarizing (Adreescu 2013). In other words, they need to be taught the concept of plagiarism and self-plagiarism (Bretag & Mahmud 2009; Panourgia & Zafiri 2009; Andreeescu 2013; Bruton 2014), as this is an integral part of academic writing, which some students, in this research, seem to be familiar with. As one student wrote, “[d]ocumenting views through in-text citations is an important convention of academic writing”, it is the ability or the disability of the student(s) to weave
in the newly acquired knowledge or the high knowledge argumentation and academic register needed to convince a reader (see Lea 2004). Based on the students’ answers, we conclude that students should not only be taught the concept, principles and conventions of academic writing (see Lea 2004), but should also be encouraged and trained to write academically (see Wischgoll 2017). Tutors/lecturers of the Hellenic Open University should not merely assume that MA students write or can write academically, they need to incorporate the teaching of academic writing (see Mullen 2001) in their teaching practices if they want their students to be able to write using a more academic style of writing. Concerning the third research question, it seems that students were able to ‘find their way’ or at least ‘find a way’ to write using a more academic style of writing (see also Zorbas 2014). Constant practice, a “[…]metalinguistic awareness in L2 writing […]”, as Ofte (2014: 3) puts it, a better understanding of what academic writing entails (see also Lear and Prentice 2016) striving for perfection (which is much harder to achieve, Fox in Rao 2015) or excellence as Rao (2015) puts it, reading extensively on the subject as well as their tutors/lecturers’ guidance and feedback (see also Coffin et al., 2003) all seem to aid students towards improving their academic writing skills.

The last research question raises the issue of what still needs to be done to improve students’ academic writing. According to the results of the study, most of the students proposed that a special training course should be offered to all students, on entering the HOU at an MA level, this stance is in line with Mullen (2001) who supports that students should undergo rigorous training in academic writing to become productive and successful writers (see also Egege & Kutieleh 2004). The students of this research also suggested that a booklet on academic writing should be distributed to all students, which is not hyperbolic if I may add, so that they can “[…] put ideas into [their] own words and paragraphs […]” thus achieving “[…] clear communication […]” in their text (Horkoff 2011,) from as early as the first semester, and that both students and tutors/lecturers should abide to it.

6. Conclusion

To round off, we, as tutors/lecturers, should not assume that our MA students know what academic writing is or that they can write using a more academic style of writing. Academic writing needs work and guidance by the tutor/lecturer, and most of all it needs meticulous and diligent work on behalf of the students themselves. Sometimes we, as tutors/lecturers, need to ‘to open doors’ and ‘take our students by the hand’ and lead them to the ‘wonderful world of academic writing’.

References


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Academic writing in distance learning programs:
The tutors’ perspective

Evdokia KARAVAS & Vasilios ZORBAS

One of the major stumbling blocks in the academic world for many young scholars is mastering the techniques of academic writing. Some come into the scene with hordes of experience in the area having penned many papers over the years. Others have logged in quite a few drafts during the course of their studies, while a good number has not made much progress beyond exams and weekly assignments. The situation, however, becomes even more daunting when one is summoned to fine hone their academic writing skills in a foreign language while pursuing graduate work in a distance learning environment. Though there is a wealth of research on academic writing in the greater vicinity of the academic world of mortar and board institutions, very little research has been carried out to date in the context of foreign language pedagogy and distance learning. This paper focuses on the multiple benefits and problems of academic assignment writing as perceived by the tutors of the Course Design and Evaluation module offered through the MA in TESOL program at the Hellenic Open University (henceforth, HOU), concluding with suggestions for effective student preparation and training in academic writing.

Η έρευνα βασίζεται στα αποτελέσματα μιας συστηματικής αξιολόγησης στη θεματική ενότητα “Σχεδιασμός, Ανάπτυξη και Αξιολόγηση Προγραμμάτων Σπουδών στη Διδασκαλία της Αγγλικής Γλώσσας” που προσφέρεται στα πλαίσια του μεταπτυχιακού προγράμματος ειδίκευσης καθηγητών Αγγλικής γλώσσας του Ελληνικού Ανοικτού Πανεπιστημίου. Παρόλο που οι φοιτητές ήταν θετικά προδιατεθειμένοι στα περισσότερα στοιχεία της ενότητας, η συγγραφή των γραπτών εργασιών αποτέλεσε ένα χώρο που ξεπέρασε τις προσδοκίες τους. Η έρευνα αυτή εστιάζει στα πολλαπλά οφέλη αλλά και τα προβλήματα της συγγραφής ακαδημαϊκών εργασιών, όπως αυτά γίνονται αντιληπτά από τους φοιτητές, και διατυπώνει προτάσεις για την αποτελεσματική προετοιμασία και εκπαίδευση στη συγγραφή ακαδημαϊκών εργασιών από τους φοιτητές του ΕΑΠ.
1. Introduction

One of the most disconcerting and dreadful moments for any college student is the laborious preparation and prompt submission of a written assignment. Though we tend to reminisce all the blissful and blithe moments of our early college years, one can never really forget those endless nights in front of a computer screen, sipping on the 4th cup of coffee and fussing over a paragraph or the proper use of a specific word while the clock read 3am, and the assignment was due “pronto” the very next morning on the instructor’s desk. In a nutshell, this pretty much describes the life of a carefree undergraduate college student trying to cram everything the night before a paper is due. The situation, however, becomes complicated when the individual assuming the role of the student is far from being a rampaging teenager with no worries and minimal responsibilities but rather an assiduous and hardworking adult who has decided to return to “school” after a long and academically dormant period in order to embark on an alternative education program and earn a graduate degree while, at the same time, juggling many pins, if you will, such as a full time job or being a full time parent (or parent-to-be).

In the realm of higher education, written assignments constitute the focal point of graduate school since they are geared toward the preparation for more complex research-oriented projects such as a master thesis and/or a dissertation. Though their role and merit is hardly disputed, there are, nonetheless, those voices from within the academic community (Lea, 2004; Lea & Street, 1998; Dysthe, 2007; Stierer 1997; Zorbas 2014) who assert that while there is, definitely, a demand for more refined pieces of academic research with a synthesis of a broad reading of theory and an original contribution to a particular area of inquiry, the skill of academic writing per se (also known as academic literacy) has literally taken the backseat, virtually leaving graduate students to their own devices.

On the other side of the pendulum, the students themselves have their own hurdles to overcome. Lea (2004) argues that due to the academic rigor inherent in this line of work, many students tend to feel quite befuddled and helpless because they really do not know how to go about putting an assignment together, and this becomes quite evident in the work they ultimately turn in. This is definitely the case with the postgraduate students at the HOU who struggle to meet the demands of such rigorous and complex (written) assignments without a solid background (nor formal training) in academic writing, and, as alarming as this may be, our educational system continues to pay no heed to a brooding problem.

Throughout this paper we will predominantly focus on the multiple benefits and problems of academic assignment writing as perceived by the tutors and conclude with suggestions for the effective preparation and training of HOU students in academic writing.

2. Evaluating the Course design and evaluation module: Main results

According to a recent study (Karavas et al 2009), the majority of the students in one of the modules at the HOU (i.e., Course Design and Evaluation) were positively predisposed toward most of the features of the course. On the whole, the students were satisfied with all aspects of the course and stated that the module managed to fulfill their expectations to a
great extent. An area, however, which exceeded their expectations (and ours for that matter) was the writing of academic assignments. Their responses to the questionnaire yielded the following results:

- The module materials were found comprehensive, up-to-date and clearly written.
- The course materials facilitated the understanding of key concepts and principles of course design.
- The content of the module was directly relevant and applicable to classroom practices.
- The accompanying reader and the extra articles provided on the Yahoo site for the course design module were deemed useful in understanding course design principles.
- The contact sessions were well organized.
- The quality of communication with the course tutor as well as the feedback provided was deemed extremely helpful and effective.

2.1. Unexpected results: Perceived value of academic writing assignments

Students’ evaluation of the various course elements mentioned in the previous section were on the whole positive and alleviated any reservations we had concerning the density of information included in the materials and the transparency, the clarity of the written work. What exceeded our expectations though and pleasantly surprised us was our students’ attitudes towards the written assignments which constitute part of their assessed work. The vast majority of our students (85%) rated the assignments they had to complete for the course, good to excellent.

This result was unexpected given the many constraints that may impede students’ willingness and motivation to complete written assignments. What are these constraints?

a) Effect of previous educational experiences, prior beliefs about teaching and learning.
Given that our students have been brought up and acculturated in the Greek educational system which is highly teacher-centered and exam oriented, and taking into account the fact that students’ expectations of postgraduate study are formed on the basis of their prior learning experience and beliefs about teaching and learning (Kember et al 2003, Laing et al 2005), we expected that academic assignment writing would contradict their preconceived notions of effective learning and assessment and that our students’ would regard the final written examination as a more efficient and valid assessment tool.

b) Students’ lack of familiarity and practice with the conventions of academic writing.
Academic writing skills and the development of academic or tertiary literacy which is defined as the articulation of high level arguments in appropriate language which genuinely enables intellectual level of thought to be expressed (Lea 2004), are not developed automatically through participation in formal education be it secondary or tertiary. Adjusting to learning in higher education, developing academic discourse and academic writing skills is part of the socialization process that students’ need to undergo in order to survive and succeed in their studies. Academic writing is one of the greatest difficulties that graduate students face regardless of the context in which they are studying and the subject they are specializing in and as Mullen (2001) states, graduate students need to experience productive, systematic and well-designed interventions that will help them change their perceptions as non-writers and socialize them into the intricacies of academic writing. Our postgraduate students have had little if any experience and practice with the mechanics and conventions of academic writing.
at undergraduate level. They enter this postgraduate program usually years after completing their undergraduate degrees and therefore any academic writing skills developed in previous studies have been forgotten or are ineffectual for success at this level.

c) **Lack of time management skills.** Our students are busy professionals and most are working mothers who struggle to balance their professional and personal responsibilities with the demands and challenges of postgraduate study. The writing of academic assignments is a strenuous, anxiety provoking and time-consuming process which our students try to squeeze in the very little free time they have available.

d)**Lack of resources (easy access to journals, libraries etc.).** Our students especially those living and working in rural or remote areas face great difficulty in finding relevant sources of information needed for their academic assignments. As has been highlighted frequently by our students, the HOU lending library is not efficient and reliable which exacerbates the problem of access to resources.

e)**Students’ lack of familiarity and practice with the conventions of academic writing.** Our students are expected to write four 1500-word assignments through the module which count in total for 30% of their total mark; the final written exam counts for 70% of the total mark. This rather irrational and unfair allocation of marks, we expected would demotivate our students and taint their perceptions of the value of academic writing.

Being well aware of these constraints we expected that our students would fail to see the importance of academic writing for their own learning and would eventually develop an aversion to the whole writing process. Despite our fears, students who responded to the questionnaire, not only expressed very positive attitudes towards the writing of assignments, but also justified their attitudes with lengthy responses. Students delineated the following benefits of academic assignment writing. According to their responses, assignments:

- facilitated the application of theory to practice,
- contributed to the improvement of classroom practices and professional development,
- forced students to study and as a result help them understand theories and principles,
- contributed to the development of students’ critical thinking and reflective skills, raised their awareness of and helped them reflect on their personal theories of teaching and learning.

3. **Research Methodology**

Many would argue (Glesne 2005; Denzin et al. 2005; Maxwell 2004; Herr et al. 2007; Anzul et al., 1991) that the research methods one employs reflect his/her ontological views regarding the way knowledge is perceived, validated and ultimately disseminated. The research methodology adopted in this paper is grounded in the interpretivist/constructivist (qualitative) research paradigm while clinging to a new trend in the qualitative research tradition which goes by the term *action (or practitioner)* research (Herr et al. 2007; 2005). Though Lea (2004: 740) claims that “research undertaken in the field [i.e., academic literacy]
tends to be qualitative in nature and of an ethnographic type,” we chose action research over ethnography due to the idiosyncratic nature of the former.

Glesne (2005) argues that although action research is closely related to ethnography (Wolcott 2008a; 2008b; 2005; 1994), its roots are predominantly “political” since it’s primarily geared toward heightening people’s awareness on controversial and sensitive issues which may eventually lend themselves to particular “actions” being taken by all parties involved, ultimately benefiting the respective communities at large (and not merely the research participants). In our case, the level of academic literacy has proven to be quite problematic and ineffective (as we will see below) in all aspects of higher education in Greece, directly implicating the greater academic community as well as higher authorities and the powers that be, while at the same time handicapping the students’ academic and intellectual growth on both an undergraduate as well as a graduate level. Therefore, grounding our study in this research tradition is not only completely justified but also unequivocally mandated.

3.1. Tutors’ perceptions of students’ academic writing skills

Despite our students’ very positive attitudes towards assignments and their awareness of the multiple learning benefits of academic writing, this, nevertheless, constitutes one of the most (if not the most) problematic areas of students’ work. Our students are either completely unfamiliar with academic writing conventions and academic discourse more generally or have limited, fragmented knowledge of mechanics of academic writing. As a result, the correction of students’ written work and the provision of constructive feedback is perhaps the most demanding, challenging and time-consuming tasks that confront HOU tutors. We firmly believe that writing involves much more than expressing and communicating ideas; we view academic writing as an “important tool for thinking, learning and knowledge creation” (Dysthe 2007:237). As a result, given that all tutors in the module view academic writing as a most useful and effective learning tool and the whole writing process as a significant awareness raising activity contributing immensely to the professional development of our teachers, systematic attempts have been made especially during this academic year, to develop and refine our students’ writing skills and boost their confidence in academic writing.

The problematic areas we have identified as a team are manifold and roughly fall into the following four categories:

a. Structure of academic assignments

Though a handful of our students have managed to put together meticulously organized papers with effective cross referencing (between the documents in the appendix and the main body of the paper) and a plausible integration of detail into the paper’s coherent whole, there are, nevertheless, those who are still struggling with ways to effectively structure their papers. Some of them tend to elaborate too much on one specific section of their assignment; thus, rendering the paper’s overall structure slightly disproportionate. Others tend to focus on minute details in many sections of their paper to a point where they literally go off on tangents and lose their initial train of thought and the thread of their argument. Their papers read more like a series of fragmented pieces of writing with no spine binding them together. One of the most significant problems with their writing is that it is not reader-based nor reader-oriented.

b. Synthesizing their reading and writing succinct and relevant literature reviews
Some assignments provide a relevant review of a broad range of literature employed which is well integrated and effectively weaved throughout the entire paper. However, there are those assignments which seem to sit in a vacuum without benefiting from what other scholars have written/researched in the past because the sources cited are either insufficient or limited to the module reader. On the other hand, there are also those assignments which contain a string of endless quotations that seem to have supplanted the discussion, and the reader gets the impression that the authors cited have literally "taken over" the paper. In general, most of our students see the purpose of the literature review as an opportunity to display (to the point of "showing off") their wide reading of a topic rather than as an essential indispensable component of a piece of academic writing which sets the theoretical framework of the discussion or the study.

c. Discussing implications of results and drawing conclusions

Even though there are assignments which demonstrate a well-articulated and convincing rationale and a sound and thorough analysis, there are also those where students either make sweeping statements without grounding their assertions in the relevant literature or provide a cursory discussion of their findings; rendering the implications of their study superficial and, to good degree, unsubstantiated.

d. Academic referencing conventions

Finally, some students have managed to master the conventions of academic referencing early on in the game, and their papers follow the APA citation protocol admirably. Many, however, continue to have problems with the format of their citations by failing to adopt a specific style and remain consistent throughout.

3.2. Possible Causes of students’ problems with academic writing

Not to sound like people beating the crisis drum for no apparent reason nor like fence sitters deflecting responsibility while pointing fingers at others, but the fact of the matter is that the causes behind our students’ inadequacies in academic writing run very deep, and there is plenty of blame to go around because, whether we like it or not, we are all at fault here. And here is why:

a. Lack of systematic training of students’ academic writing skills

Even though we are all aware of our students’ shortcomings when it comes to writing, we, nevertheless, seek to weather the problem by sweeping it under the rug hoping that it will eventually resolve itself, instead of dealing with it head on through the implementation of a rigorous academic writing program which seems to be lacking from our academic institutions nationwide.

b. Treating students as a homogenous group with same needs and experiences

We teach our students that when it comes to classroom practices, one size definitely does not fit all and that each learner’s needs come first and should be properly addressed. Yet in the same breath, we treat our students as a homogenous group with the same needs and experiences, disregarding the fact that they don’t come to
us in one “size” but run the gamut from being full-time students to full-time employees and, in many cases, full-time parents, and this is a reality that unfortunately defies the purpose of quality learning and democratic education in the first place.

c. Difficulties with the transition to postgraduate study

We seem oblivious to the fact that our students have been out of the academic picture for quite a while now. So the transition from their already busy professional and personal lives to the rigorous mandates of graduate school is anything but a smooth sailing for them which, in return, has a direct impact on the way they re-immerse themselves in the academic community.

3.3. Addressing students’ academic writing problems: Measures currently in effect

In light of the above daunting situation and given the limited resources available to us, we are pretty much aware that as a team we are no miracle-workers and that the measures we are currently implementing in our program constitute mere “baby steps” which remotely address the problem (let alone rectify it), yet, in all honesty, we would, indeed, be amiss, disservicing our students contemptuously, if we simply went along with the flow and essentially joined the bandwagon of indifference and sheer indolence. And since drastic times call for drastic measures, our team has factored the following into our program in an effort to provide targeted feedback on our students’ writing skills and raise their awareness on the intricacies of academic writing:

i. Intensive in-class practice through handouts and worksheets tackling pivotal academic reading and writing issues, such as critical reading, synthetic writing, citation format and plagiarism.

ii. Submission of an assignment outline along with a working bibliography, 2-3 weeks prior to the deadline, which is subsequently followed up by an intensive one-to-one telephone session with the instructor.

iii. Peer editing and critique of anonymous samples of students’ writing during every contact session.

iv. Formation of writing groups which read and critically respond to each other’s paper before and/or after each contact session and prior to the submission deadline.

v. Detailed discussion of common academic writing problems illustrated with examples from students’ assignments. This awareness raising activity is carried out during contact sessions which take place after the submission of assignments.

vi. Provision of detailed feedback on all aspects of their writing on the basis of the set criteria; conscious attempts are made to highlight the problems with their work and to provide suggestions or alternatives for overcoming them.

3.4. Suggestions for the future

The truth of the matter is that the above measures are in no shape or form remotely sufficient to prepare our students for the challenges and demands of writing a research-
based dissertation. Quite frankly, with just these measures alone, we are merely putting a band aid on the problem, instead of tackling it from the bottom-up. Ideally what is needed is a structured and rigorous academic writing program effectively weaved throughout all modules, ardently preparing our students to grapple with the demands of writing a dissertation when that moment comes around.

Acknowledging the constraints and difficulties involved in setting up, resourcing and implementing a separate, independent writing program, we believe that systematic and intensive writing practice and input should be integrated in and form an indispensable part of all contact sessions throughout all modules. The practice activities and input we provide should not be haphazard and arbitrarily chosen by each module tutor; they should in their entirety (i.e., taken in tandem) form the components of a well thought-out, tailor-made and systematic academic writing program. We therefore suggest that the two compulsory modules at the beginning of the program, integrate practice on pivotal academic reading and writing issues, such as critical reading, synthetic writing, citation format and plagiarism gradually in every contact session. Elective modules can then focus on training students in the mechanics of academic writing such as writing bibliographies, structuring assignments, using appendices effectively and presenting assignments.

The need for such a program has long been acknowledged by everyone on board, and, under the guidance of our scientific coordinator, the blueprints for its institution and implementation have been drawn up by our team. However, more work needs to be done in that direction.

5. Conclusion

There comes a time in our professional careers when we heed certain calls from those whose voices have been garbled up in a mire of apathy and indifference for way too long. And once this moment swings by, it will be our cue to act. For our students' sake, though, this moment couldn't have come any sooner. Whether they are at the beginning of our program or during the final stages of their studies, satisfying all the requirements put forth by this program is their call and only theirs to make alone. This also includes mastering the techniques of academic writing. We, on the other hand, have our own share of responsibilities to guide them through this process and, thus, fulfilling our end of the bargain. And though we are confident that despite the odds our program will eventually survive all doldrums and end up on top, there is, nonetheless, still more work to be done if we really want to sow the seeds of our labor in the years to come.

References


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A preliminary genre-based analysis
of M.A. dissertation abstracts
written in a Greek TESOL distance learning environment

Anna-Maria HATZITHEODOROU

Existing literature on academic writing has extensively focused on published texts, such as the research article, written by skilled writers. However, little attention has been paid to writing by less skilled writers, and in particular postgraduate students striving to come to terms with all the conventions associated with academic writing. This paper aims to shed light on the writing practices of young scholars who pursue a Master's degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (henceforth TESOL) in a Greek distance learning environment. The genre considered is the abstract of the MA dissertation. Fifty abstracts are analysed by means of a framework for the analysis of abstracts, which is mainly based on Swales's (1990/2004) CARS (Create a Research Space) model for the analysis of introductions of research articles but also draws on three other models. The proposed framework for the analysis of abstracts identifies how students structure their texts and project stance. Results show that some moves are more central than others and the tone that students adopt for their abstracts is mainly descriptive. It is contended that further analysis of students’ dissertation abstracts in other academic environments can assist in our understanding of how young scholars situate themselves through their texts within the broader academic community.
1. Introduction

This paper aims to shed light on the writing practices of young scholars who pursue a Master’s degree in TESOL in a Greek distance learning environment. The text type that will be examined is the abstract of the dissertation that students produce at the final stage of their postgraduate program in order to obtain their degree. While there is extensive literature on skilled writers and the abstracts that accompany their published papers or Ph.D theses, to the best of my knowledge, little research has focused to date on M.A. dissertation abstracts by less seasoned writers, and, in particular, within foreign language pedagogy and distance learning. Therefore, this study intends to fill this gap.

2. The genre of the research article abstract

The abstract works as the introduction to the research article and serves a marketing function, as it is – after the title – the first section of the research article that readers will encounter; in this sense, it can determine the number of people who will read the actual article (Hyland, 2004; Swales & Feak 2004). Drawing an analogy between newspaper reports and scientific journal articles, Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995, pp. 32, 34) show that a journal abstract has a function similar to the lead of a newspaper report and acts as “a screening device”. Likewise, a Master’s dissertation abstract acts “as an efficient ambassador for the document it represents” (Bordet, 2014, p. 131) as this is the first part that potential readers of the dissertation will read before they decide to move on to the main text.

Content-wise, the abstract provides a synopsis of the main points to be further elaborated upon in the article or dissertation; this summarizing element has an added effect: to inform readers about the content of the paper (cf. Hatzitheodorou, 2008, p. 62 for an analogy between abstracts and summaries). In terms of Halliday’s (1994) metafunctions of language, this emphasis on the content relates to what a text is about and corresponds to the ideational metafunction, which, combined with the textual metafunction (i.e., the structuring of
information) projects the interpersonal metafunction (i.e., the writer’s stance towards his/her topic). Therefore, the abstract is the intersection of informative and persuasive text types.

The persuasive aim of the abstract is to construct an identity of the writer as a credible community member that has insider status. As Hyland (2004, p. 63) puts it, writers use this genre to typically situate themselves and their work in their disciplines and “display credibility and ‘membership’.” This idea of belonging to a discourse community becomes very clear in Swales’ (1990, p. 58) classic definition:

a genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style. [emphasis added]

Irrespective of the fact that Swales (2004, p. 64) may be “less sanguine about the value and viability of such definitional depictions, in the light of all the various writings on genre over the last decade”, the intertwining of communicative purposes with rhetorical structure, content and style seems to be quite pertinent to this paper.

Previous research has focused on abstracts (either for conference presentations or journal articles) from various academic fields. Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995), for instance, examined abstracts submitted to the Conference on College Composition and Communication; Halleck and Connor (2006), those submitted to a TESOL Convention, and Agathopoulou (2009), abstracts considered for a conference on theoretical and applied linguistics. Several disciplines have been represented in studies of research article abstracts: medicine (Salager-Meyer, 1992), applied linguistics (Santos, 1996), phonetics and psychology (Martín-Martín, 2003), psychology (Hartley, 2003), humanities, social sciences and natural sciences (Stotesbury, 2003), linguistics (Lorés, 2004), sciences and humanities (Hyland, 2004), and applied linguistics and educational technology (Pho, 2008). Frey and Kaplan (2010) is a study that has focused on abstracts of research articles in the discipline of law and uses Bhatia’s (1993) four-move structure (introducing purpose / describing methodology / summarizing results / presenting conclusions) to analyze abstracts; abstracts of business research articles have been considered by Stotesbury (2003) and Hyland (2004) and Hatzitheodorou (2014) considers abstracts of articles in business and law.

Contrary to the studies presented above that focus on abstracts of published articles, I will examine here abstracts that are part of unpublished MA dissertations written to fulfill the final requirement of a graduate program in TESOL. The guiding principle for the analysis carried out is Swales’ (1990, 2004) notion of moves, according to which sections of a research paper can be analyzed in steps that writers often take to organize content and ‘argue their case’. An adapted framework of moves is then presented that can be used for research purposes and in English for Specific Purposes/ English for Academic Purposes (ESP/EAP) curricula (Hatzitheodorou, 2014). Moves are considered in relation to their use: it is contended that, while some moves are indispensable, others do not necessarily figure in dissertation abstracts. The analysis aims to reveal patterns of move deployment in dissertation abstracts in relation to information structuring and stance projection.
3. The study

3.1. The corpus

The corpus used for this study included 50 M.A. dissertation abstracts written by Greek postgraduate students who were at the final stage of their Master’s program in TESOL at the Hellenic Open University. By the time they had reached the dissertation stage, students had already written assignments and exams for the modules they had attended. Most probably, this was the first time students produced a dissertation abstract and were required to produce one that should be no longer than two pages. There was no official instruction provided to them regarding the techniques of writing an abstract; however, coaching would be provided by the students’ dissertation supervisors. Within the time span of 2017 and 2013, ten samples from each year were randomly selected.

3.2. Methodology

3.2.1. Frameworks of analysis

The present study draws on four frameworks (two for the analysis of research article introductions, one for the analysis of research article abstracts and one for conference abstracts) and then combines the aforementioned models in order to propose an adapted version. It is hoped that this version will capture all the levels of meaning-making in the abstracts under discussion.

Almost any discussion on genre makes at least an initial reference to Swales’ (1990, 2004) CARS (Create a Research Space) model for the analysis of introductions of research articles and this paper could be no exception to this rule. Swales’ model very effectively puts forth the metaphor of researchers situating themselves by means of their research into the research area they are working on. This idea is further elaborated upon by Lewin/Fine/Young’s (2001) adaptation of Swales’ model by placing emphasis on the researcher finding a place for himself/herself within the academic community (Table 1). While Swales' model is more extended than what appears in Table 1 and includes various steps under the major moves, only those aspects that can apply to the major organization of abstracts are delineated. This choice will be discussed in section 3.2.2 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Move 1</td>
<td>Establishing a territory</td>
<td>Claiming relevance of field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Move 2</td>
<td>Establishing a niche</td>
<td>Establishing the gap present research is meant to fill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Move 3</td>
<td>Occupying the niche</td>
<td>Previewing author’s new accomplishments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Swales’ CARS model and Lewin/Fine/Young’s adaptation.

Regarding research article abstracts, Pho’s (2008, p. 234) variation on the moves framework divides the abstract into its major constituent parts, with wh-questions corresponding to each one of them (Table 2).
Table 2. A condensed version of Pho’s (2008) framework for abstract analysis.

The final framework that will be considered is Agathopoulou’s (2009, p. 152) model of moves in conference abstracts, an adaptation of Halleck & Connor’s (2006) model. A conference abstract may be different from a research article abstract in that the former is a distinct text that can stand on its own, while the latter is attached to another text (the research article). However, there is no doubt that the two genres share the same communicative purpose: to present the researcher’s ideas in a manner that would be appealing to readers. Therefore, certain moves can be found in both text types (Table 3).

Table 3. Agathopoulou’s (2009) model of moves in conference abstracts.

3.2.2. The proposed framework for the analysis of abstracts

Certain features of the four models discussed in section 3.2.1. were selected and combined to form an adapted framework, which may appear ‘crowded’ as it attempts to bring together many aspects of textual analysis simultaneously (Table 4). However, the rationale behind combining four approaches is that a comprehensive analysis of abstracts should operate at both the macro- and micro-structural level of organization; focusing on the former would require a top-down reading approach, while focusing on the latter, a bottom-up one (cf. van Dijk, 2001 for discussing textual coherence as the interaction between macro- and micro-structures and Pho, 2008 for the distinction between bottom-up and top-down approaches to the identification of moves). In our analysis of abstracts, we proceed from macro-organization, where we get a
general perspective of the structure, to micro-organization, where we focus on the content of specific parts.

- **Move 1:** Setting the scene /presenting the research space.
  *What has been known about the research topic?*
  - 1a. Territory: area of research
  - 1b. Reporting Previous Research (RPR): citations

- **Move 2:** Indicating a gap in the field or presenting a view that you are going to refute. Creating your own research space by presenting your study.
  *What is the study about?*
  - 2a. Gap: problem, issue
  - 2b. Goal: purpose of the study, research questions
  - 2c. Method: participants, materials and procedures

- **Move 3:** Presenting the results of your study and your contribution.
  *What do the results mean/So what?*
  - 3a. Results/Discussion: discussing the findings or the arguments on the issue
  - 3b. Importance claim: so what?
  - 3c. Suggestions for further research: future directions

*Table 4. Framework for the analysis of abstracts proposed in this study.*

To account, therefore, for the macro-structural level, I kept intact from Swales’s (1990, 2004) framework and its adaptation by Lewin/Fine/Young (2001), the three main moves (Table 4), as these replicate the idea of researchers presenting a research space (move 1), in which they will attempt to situate themselves, by pointing to a gap in the literature and presenting their work (move 2), and establishing themselves through their findings as credible personas in the eyes of the discourse community (move 3) (cf. Hyland, 2004 and section 1 above). These moves form the backbone of the text. In Swales’ (2004, p. 226) words, “this tripartite structure offers a carefully modulated orientation for the reader/reviewer of what is to come”. Indeed, the use of a schema or mental model that would be related to the macro-structure of a text considerably contributes to discourse connectedness and aids reading comprehension (cf. Bartlett, 1932, for schemata and Johnson-Laird, 1983, for mental models). Still at the macro-structural level, the framework incorporates the wh-questions of Pho’s (2008) model as they can effectively direct the reader to answers which, in their turn, provide the basic information of an abstract (Table 4).

Narrowing down our focus on the micro-structural level, we identify and label certain parts of the abstract as belonging to one of the sub-moves, 1a to 3c, which draw on Agathopoulou’s (2009) model; most moves are considered, but ‘means’ is left out as it is found mainly in conference abstracts and not in research article abstracts. In addition, as the condensed form of
an abstract does call for succinctness, results and discussion are two moves combined together and the explanation of each move is done only with phrases, not complete sentences (Agathopoulou, 2009) to avoid overburdening the resulting framework (see Table 4 on previous page).

To sum up, the blending of four frameworks into one aims at highlighting the organization of abstracts at both the global and local levels. To account for the global level (i.e., macro-organization, or “rhetorical structure”, according to Lores 2004, p. 281), the three major moves developed by Swales (1990, 2004) and then adapted by Lewin/Fine/Young (2001) are taken and likewise labelled “moves 1 to 3”; from Pho's (2008) framework, only the wh-questions are included as these would point to the informational content of the abstract. At the local level (i.e., micro-organization), drawing on Agathopoulou's (2009) categorization, sub-moves (1a to 3c) are introduced so that “the linguistic realizations” of moves (Lores, 2004, p. 281; Pho, 2008, p. 235) can be rendered transparent (Table 4). Since the proposed framework operates at various levels, it enables a detailed analysis of abstracts.

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative data

The framework for the analysis of abstracts presented in table 4 above was used to identify the moves that student writers deployed in their texts. The moves that seem to be indispensable and are therefore included in all abstracts are 1a (area of research), 2b (goal) and 2c (method) (100%). Next comes move 3a (results), which appears in the majority of texts (90%). Moves 3b (importance claim) and 3c (suggestions) can be found in more or less half of the samples (50% and 40% respectively). Finally, the two moves that seldom appear in abstracts are 2a (gap) and 1b (previous research) (16% and 10% respectively). Finally, it is interesting to note that: (a) none of the abstracts exhibited all eight moves and (b) many of the abstracts (58%) start off by combining in one sentence move 2b (purpose) and 1a (territory). The results are shown in Table 5 and figure 1 below; for a complete presentation of all the moves that appear in abstracts of this study, see the Appendix.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moves</th>
<th>Total number of abstracts: 50</th>
<th>Instances of moves</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1a (territory)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b (previous research)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2a (gap)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2b (purpose)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2c (method)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3a (results)</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3b (importance claim)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3c (suggestions)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 5. Instances of moves in the dissertation abstracts.*
4.2. Qualitative data

In this section, we will look at data in relation to two aspects: (a) structuring of information and (b) projection of stance. To examine how students structure their texts, we will draw on Swales & Feak’s (2004, p. 225) terms used to characterize methods sections of a research article according to the amount of information they provide. We can label the abstracts that rank high in the number of moves found in them as ‘extended’, the ones with an adequate number of moves ‘intermediate’, and finally, the shortest ones, ‘condensed’. To examine stance, we will mainly look at linguistic features that point to evaluation (cf. Hyland, 2005 and Hatzitheodorou & Mattheoudakis, 2011). Stance refers to the attitude that writers adopt vis-à-vis their topic, and in abstracts this attitude is related to the confidence they show in relation to the results of their study. Exponents of stance are normally present in move 3, where students discuss the results of their study (move 3a), its significance (move 3b) and its contribution to further research (move 3c).

4.2.1. Example of an extended abstract

The first abstract that we will analyze can be considered almost complete as it exhibits most of the framework moves; the only move missing is 3c (suggestions for further research) (Table 6). Move 1 includes the research area of giving and receiving feedback as well as the existing literature (moves 1a and 1b respectively). Interestingly enough, the research gap (2a) that the study intends to fill is initially presented in move 1 with the phrase “a rather underexplored issue” and then elaborated upon in move 2: “there is still a lack of research on how each group of students benefit in writing and the role language level plays in determining the effects of peer feedback on students’ writing performance.” Next come the purpose of the study (move 2b) as well as the methods used (move 2c). The results (3a) and the importance claim (3b) are combined together in one sentence and for this reason, we would call this a ‘blended move’. Blended moves are very common in the whole corpus of abstracts and indicated with slashes in the cumulative results in the Appendix. Stance is effected in move 3b (importance claim) through lexical features that show improvement: forms of the verbs “benefit”, “enhance”,
“improve” as well as the phrase, “a determining role in their writing improvement” (see the italicized parts in Table 6 below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extended abstract</th>
<th>Moves according to the proposed framework</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This research forms part of EFL feedback-related and, more specifically, peer feedback research. It aims at shedding more light on the issue of who benefit more in writing; peer feedback givers or receivers, a rather underexplored issue.</td>
<td>Move 1: Setting the scene /presenting the research space 1a. Territory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existing studies, conducted either with students at an English language institute (Lundstrom &amp; Baker, 2009) or at university with undergraduate students (Cho &amp; MacArthur, 2011), have shown that student givers of feedback benefit more than receivers.</td>
<td>2a. Gap 1b. Previous research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>However, there is still a lack of research on how each group of students benefit in writing and the role language level plays in determining the effects of peer feedback on students’ writing performance. In an effort to address these issues further with younger EFL students, the present research explores how givers’ and receivers’ written output improves in terms of organization and content as well as the effect the different language level of feedback givers and receivers has on students’ writing improvement. For the purposes of this research, the method of action research was applied in four different language level classes, A2 and B1+ level receivers and B1 and C2 level givers, with 18 students participating in total. For triangulation purposes the research in question involved drafts and redrafts of three consecutive writings on the part of the receivers and another three written outputs on the part of the givers. There was also a final writing, one month after the first three writings had been completed, with students getting involved in peer feedback processes, so that time triangulation would be possible and students’ improvement in the long term could be tracked.</td>
<td>Move 2: Indicating a gap in the field or presenting a view that you are going to refute. Creating your own research space by presenting your study. 2a. Gap 2b. Purpose of the study 2c. Method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Move 3: Presenting the results of your study and your contribution.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The data collected from the students’ compositions showed that all students benefited, with receivers benefiting more than student givers, especially in ‘clear organisation of ideas into paragraphs’, ‘logical ordering of paragraphs’, ‘use of linking words’ and generation of ‘clear meaning structures’. In addition, it was found that feedback givers’ and receivers’ language level played a determining role in their writing improvement, interfering with the overall results for peer feedback givers and receivers. Finally, it seems that students’ engagement in peer feedback processes enhanced the sociocultural character of learning, leading students to the adoption of writing strategies experienced in the classroom community they belonged to (Donato & McCormick, 1994), thus improving in writing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intermediate abstract</th>
<th>Moves according to the proposed framework</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of a WebQuest-based writing instruction on developing Greek EFL learners’ writing skills. Another aim of the study was to examine students’ attitudes towards the use of WQs. | Move 1: Setting the scene /presenting the research space  
1a. Territory / 2b. Purpose of the study |
| The study adopts the quasi-experimental design. In particular, 6 grade students of two primary schools in Larisa participated in this study, one as a control group and the other as an experimental group. The students of the experimental group were taught to apply a WQ-based writing | Move 2: Indicating a gap in the field or presenting a view that you are going to refute. Creating your own research space by presenting your study.  
2c. Method |

Table 6. Moves of an extended abstract.

4.2.2. Example of an intermediate abstract

This category includes abstracts that exhibit the basic moves and constitute the majority of the texts in this study (cf. Appendix). We notice the occurrence of the blended move 2b/1a (purpose and territory), which is quite common, as already mentioned in sections 4.1 and 4.2.1. Then, the method (move 2c) is presented, followed by yet another blended move, 3a/3b (results and importance claim). Similarly to the extended abstract, here the writer’s confidence in his/her results becomes transparent by means of the verbs “improved”, “validate”, “boosted”, “benefits”, “improves” and the phrase “positive attitudes” (see the italicized parts in Table 7 below).
instruction, designed by the researcher. The students of the control group received a rather traditional writing instruction. The study includes both qualitative and quantitative data.

The findings of the study revealed that the experimental students significantly improved their writing scores after the WQ application when compared to the control group, which seems to validate the first hypothesis that WQs have positive effects on writing skills. The results also indicated that the WQ-based activity boosted students' cooperative skills. In addition, the findings showed that most students had positive attitudes towards the WQ activity as a whole. The findings of this study suggest that implementing WQs in the EFL classrooms benefits primary school students' writing ability and improves their attitudes towards writing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Move 3: Presenting the results of your study and your contribution. 3a. Results / 3b. Importance claim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The abstract in this section exhibits the absolute basics: territory (1a), which might be seen as somewhat long, purpose of the study (2b) and method (2c). It is, however, missing a major part: move 3, which corresponds to the results of the study and its contribution to research (Table 8). The abstract could therefore, be safely considered incomplete and not reader-friendly as it does not sufficiently fulfill its role, which is to inform the reader about the main parts of the dissertation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condensed abstract</th>
<th>Moves according to the proposed framework</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessment is among the most crucial features of language education. Well-designed tests provide not only relevant but also reliable and valid information about learners’ progress while the data retrieved can be used to enhance the language program itself so that it can better meet the needs of both language learners and the educators who serve them, or identify the proficiency level a language user holds. Educational technology has increasingly been replacing all traditional means of teaching, learning and consequently assessing the progress of second language acquisition in the 21st century. Therefore, it is a field that allows wide exploration and exploitation in order to provide learners with...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Move 1: Setting the scene /presenting the research space 1a. Territory</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
more fruitful learning and testing environments.

To this end, within the context of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Greek language schools, the current study aims at exploring the widely-acknowledged potential of certain innovative methods to trigger learners’ motivation and positive attitudes towards testing by creating meaningful conditions for the development of learner autonomy and digital literacy. Towards this direction, a number of Web 2.0 tools were used to assess students’ linguistic, grammatical, speaking and writing skills allowing at the same time opportunities for self-assessment and self-reflection, while paving the way for their detachment from traditional assessment methods.

| Move 2: Indicating a gap in the field or presenting a view that you are going to refute. Creating your own research space by presenting your study. |
| 2b. Purpose of the study |
| 2c. Method |

| Table 8. Moves of a condensed abstract. |

5. Discussion

This paper dealt with dissertation abstracts in order to identify the writing practices of EFL young scholars pursuing an English postgraduate degree in a distance learning environment. An adapted framework for analyzing abstracts that resulted from four other models was applied to abstracts of dissertations.

It was found that for almost all abstracts some moves are more central than others: territory (move 1a), the purpose of the study (move 2b), method (move 2c) and discussion of the results (move 3a) were the most frequent ones. Therefore, these abstracts are mainly “results-driven”, as “they concentrate on the research findings and what might be concluded from them” (Swales & Feak, 2004, p. 282). They focus on the research conducted, make references to methods, give detailed accounts of their results, and point to the significance of these results through lexical choices that reflect improvement (verbs such as “improve”, “enhance”, “facilitate”, “contribute”, and adjectives such as “positive”, “beneficial”, “significant”, “valuable”). In general, while the writers’ confidence in their studies is reflected in their lexical choices, the tone of the abstracts is mainly descriptive.

The two moves mainly associated with stance and the persona that the author wishes to project for himself/herself and indicate the originality and contribution of his/her dissertation to research, i.e., 2a (gap) and 3b (importance claim), are underrepresented (see Table 5). In particular, move 2a would situate students in the research area after they have shown what others have not done before them, yet students seem to be reluctant to point to a gap in previous research that their research would fill; hence the scarcity of this move in the data (only eight occurrences in fifty texts). While more frequent than 2a, move 3b (importance claim) modestly highlights the importance of the study. Strong claims that would clearly and unquestionably present students as competent researchers that truly contribute to research are
rarely made. Yet, this is to be expected: these abstracts and, by extension, these dissertations are most probably the first major piece of work that students have written in their academic studies, and therefore, they cannot have the confidence of a seasoned writer.

Lack of confidence might also explain why suggestions for further research (move 3c), when included in the abstract as a move, are only mentioned and not actually presented; students may not feel confident enough to actually suggest something new. Another possible explanation might be that they feel the abstract is probably too early for making suggestions for future research. This could also be the case for the scarcity of move 1a (reporting previous research); students may not have the skill to delineate which studies to choose from the literature review to include in the abstract or they probably think that previous research does not need to be part of an abstract.

Certain limitations of this study preclude generalizations. This was a small-scale study and, therefore, more samples from more dissertations are necessary in order to provide sounder conclusions. In addition, the identification of the moves was done only by the researcher; a future study can include coding of the moves by more readers so that inter-rater reliability can be achieved and potential subjectivity reduced. The academic field this study focused on was TESOL. The framework proposed in this study can be used for the analysis of dissertation abstracts in other fields.

This implementation can provide a better picture of how young scholars pursuing postgraduate degrees structure their texts and possibly what guidelines different disciplines and postgraduate programs set for their students’ dissertation abstracts. Identifying writing patterns in developing writers’ texts is certainly not meant to be done in a prescriptive manner nor does this practice aim to “present a straightjacket” for writers of abstracts (Hartley 2003, p. 368). Rather, with all its flaws, the framework for the analysis of dissertation abstracts could map how young scholars take pride in accomplishing a major project such as the dissertation and become members of the academic community through their texts.

References


### Appendix

**Moves in dissertation abstracts.**

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Academic writing: Conformity and beyond

A brief note

Christine CALFOGLOU

Let me start on an anecdotal note. I have drafted part of my doctoral dissertation and am expecting my supervisors’ verdict. I’m literally floundering in a sea of doubts: Is my writing reader-friendly? Will it come up to the academic reader’s expectations and standards? Have I followed the proper line of arguments and built my thesis plausibly? Is my review of the literature exhaustive? Have I convinced the reader of the novelty of my contribution? Is there a contribution in the first place? … The verdict is merciless: “Interesting work, Christina, but …” and a barrage of flaws ensues. Dominant among them: “Some points are cryptic. And, most importantly, your writing doesn’t seem to conform to the conventions of the academic writing community. It is a bit of a hybrid, a cross between linguistics and literature, which is rather confusing, for this is not literature, it’s linguistics, so clarity and lucidity of expression are a major concern”. So, I tell myself “If you are to convince your reader-judges, you cannot possibly give free rein to your literary self. Try to make your style more staccato and matter-of-fact. Shorten your sentences, use more mainstream, linguistics-oriented vocabulary, avoid metaphor”. But then my other self-bounces back and refuses to be hushed: “Oh come on, what’s so terribly wrong with long sentences? Henry James – and please do not hasten to call this arrogance, for how dare I associate my writing with the great novelist’s …” wrote paragraph long sentences. And, anyway, I have always believed writing was my strong point. I was after all praised for my compositions at school and my undergraduate study writing proceeded smoothly. So, why submit?”

Again on an anecdotal note, a student of mine once decided to opt out of the course, because she felt uncomfortable in the academic rigor straitjacket. She was more of a literary type, she said, so she found applied linguistics and methodology were too dry and deprived her of her freedom of expression.

Harsh and unattractive as this may sound, academic writing is a process of submission and conformity. It is an exercise in discipline and an effort, easier to some but quite a challenge to others, to belong, to become a member of academia and gain recognition in the community. To achieve this, you need to develop a good command of the conventions employed in writing of the kind. Academic writing is a genre in itself and, like all genres, it possesses specific attributes. Quoting from https://library.leeds.ac.uk/info/14011/writing/106/academic_writing, “Academic writing is clear, concise, focused, structured and backed up by evidence. Its purpose is to aid the reader’s
understanding. It has a formal tone and style, but it is not complex and does not require the use of long sentences and complicated vocabulary”. Or, alternatively: “Characteristics of academic writing include a formal tone, use of the third-person rather than first-person perspective (usually), a clear focus on the research problem under investigation, and precise word choice” (https://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/academicwriting).

The actual wording may vary slightly but the common denominator is the importance of clarity, focus, conciseness and precision, formality. Opacity is strongly discouraged – “It’s not unheard of for scholars to utilize needlessly complex syntax or overly expansive vocabulary that is impenetrable or not well-defined” (https://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/academicwriting) – and minimizing excessive or inappropriate use of specialized vocabulary may be referred to as a way to achieve clarity (ibid.). Focus involves demonstrating an understanding of a specific subject area, which requires systematic planning as well as selectivity in dealing with the often innumerable sources available. Conciseness and precision relate to the rule of economy – keeping what you really need to support your point and leaving out redundancies – as well as to the appropriate use of the relevant terminology, which will, of course, vary for each discipline. What helps keep you focused is the evidence basis of your writing, the need to support what you say with the help of the literature in a step-by-step fashion. Your choice of diction testifies to your awareness of the specific discipline boundaries – the use of words generally acknowledged as expressing concepts relevant to the discipline – and is therefore crucial to achieving what Halliday and Matthiessen (2013) refer to as “lexical cohesion”, words bonding together in harmony in search of a common goal, that of delimiting the field. Finally, formality suggests giving up all personal tone of expression, a true ego defeat. The contribution to science is yours, built, of course, on the basis of prior knowledge, but the voice cannot be too gruff or too soft, as yours might be. It has to conform.

This is further complicated by the tentativeness expected of academic writing. Watling (2017) argues in favor of “we speculate” rather than “we have established”, “our work suggests” rather than “our work proves”, “we propose” rather than “we demand”. This deals another blow on one’s ego. You can never be certain, so conviction is left out of the picture and everything is potentially overturned in a rival piece of academic writing. This may literally reduce you to silence.

The academic writing straitjacket may often involve setting very concrete rules of expression. Here’s an example: “Only include one main idea per sentence. Keep your sentences to a reasonable length (generally not more than 25 words). Long sentences can be difficult to follow and this may distract from your point. Avoid repetition.” (https://library.leeds.ac.uk/info/14011/writing/106/academic_writing/5).

Most of us would wince at the idea. This is far too prescriptive! It counteracts the notion of free thinking and a scientist, an academic writer, is a free thinker par excellence. So, are we sacrificing content to form, targeting homogeneity where heterogeneity might be cherished most? Do we really need all this prescriptiveness? If academic writing is a genre in its own right, academic writing in each area being a genre within the genre, are genre boundaries so clear-cut? What about interdisciplinarity? Couldn’t we say academic writing is interdisciplinary, a fusion of styles and concepts? Would this lead to a new Babel, opening a huge rift in academia? Should a poet doff his/her poetic attire when writing science and a scientist don the poet’s dress in writing poetry, especially in the digital world, where genre boundaries seem to be systematically trespassed? In other words, isn’t there room in applied linguistics and methodology for my ex-student, who bitterly quit the course?
This is, of course, not new. The empowering and disempowering properties of discourse have been discussed extensively, as has the role of the individual enmeshed in this power game. Foucault (1969) refers to discourse exercising a power outside the bounds of which one cannot exist while Critical Discourse Analysts argue against the idea of “value-free” (van Dijk, 2001, p.352) language and scholarly discourse, underscoring its socially marked properties and its ability to engage users in complex power roles. “[...] some ways of making meaning are dominant or mainstream [...]”, says Fairclough (2005, p. 79; see also 2013), so they can get hegemonic, strangling less mainstream means of signification. If applied to the context of academic writing, especially for novice writers, whose experience of the specific discourse order is limited, such hegemony can become most tyrannical. Yet, there is hope for the dissident voice: “social agents draw upon social structures (including languages) and practices [...] in producing texts, but actively work these ‘resources’, create (potentially novel) texts, rather than simply instantiating them” (ibid., p.80). This would mean that learners called upon to produce academic writing need not only reproduce existing wisdom but can also (or inevitably do) make their own contribution, which would make the power game a fairer one.

In Hyland’s (2009, p.25) terms, academic writing is the “fight” between “constraint” and “creativity”, “identity” and “disciplinarity”. It involves “achieving(ing) credibility as insiders and reputations as individuals”; in other words, conformity to the dominant discoursal practices of the academic community but also “authorial identity” (ibid.). This requires “negotiating a representation of self from the standardizing conventions of disciplinary discourses” (ibid.), which is, however, as the scholar admits, “a skilled accomplishment”. If identity only makes sense within a social context, it appears that the only way to achieve it is by meddling with existing discourses (Bakhtin, 1986), adopting and transforming them (see Hyland, 2009, p.26). Faced with the conventions of academic writing, then, students need to strike a balance between what Hyland (ibid., p.27) refers to as “shared norms” on the one hand and “personal traits” on the other.

If the semiotics of initiation into academic writing involves both imitation and appropriation and transformation of community practices, we could argue that the non-submissive voices referred to at the beginning of this note can worm their way into these practices less drably than originally expected. Yet, how exactly can this be done? How can student writers be brought to the point of “cherish(ing) their identity” (Thi Ly, 2003, p.20)? The online guidelines we gave examples of earlier show no resilience. Ivanic and Simpson (1992, p. 170) see this opportunity as “a matter of choosing one among a range of alternatives which seem consistent with one’s own identity” (Thi Ly, 2003, p.19). This is an interesting idea but needs a lot of elaboration to become more tangible. Thi Ly (2003) advocates free writing, among other things, for instance, but how feasible would this be within the space and time constraints of an academic course?

These spatiotemporal constraints are particularly relevant to Distance Education programmes. Academic assignments are submitted online and this involves a very different conception of space and time to what we have known so far. When physical presence is lacking and the time dimension is somehow reduced to the here-and-now, the author’s ‘text’ becomes immaterial in some way; yet, at the same time, by being deposited in an online repository, it also acquires permanence and visibility, alias materiality. It’s non-existent as a multi-dimensional object but also part of the “public sphere” (Habermas, 1989), potentially contributing to the specific discourse order. This could be said to heap quite a load on to authorial shoulders but would also give the student-writer text the agency it may yearn for.
So, how do we as tutors deal with all this? How do we help our students cope with the complexities of academic discourse, without the soothing effects of physical presence? We could make our students into a community of practice, enhance networking, collaborativeness, in the form of online forums, for example, and encourage somewhat unstructured expression in peer or student-tutor exchanges, semi-expressivist writing, which is more “to be learnt, not taught ...” (Hyland, 2016, pp.12-13), allowing space for individual meaning-making, without much interference. A fine balance between this rather “a-social” view of writing (ibid.) and its social semiosis features needs to be sought, however, if integration in the academic community is to be achieved, and the ways of striking this balance remain to be carefully and systematically explored. Democritisation of the public sphere born out of the common goals of all interactants would help fight the fear of exposure and might involve openness to the novelty and freshness brought in by novice writers. Tutor and peer feedback could be channelled in the direction of moulding both identity and sameness. Perhaps sameness is, to a certain extent, the stage preceding change, for, as in most other cases, you can only violate the rules once you master them. Most importantly, however, we could try to breathe a knowledge-transforming whiff into our courses, following Scardamalia and Bereiter’s (2014, p.400) advice. This would involve a ‘knowledge building pedagogy’ “based on the premise that authentic creative knowledge work can take place in (learning contexts) – knowledge work that does not merely emulate the work of mature scholars or designers but that substantively advances the state of knowledge in the (learning) community and situates it within the larger societal knowledge building effort”. A knowledge-building perspective might activate the agents of change and accommodate dissident voices, providing a pluralistic learning framework, so interdisciplinary learning and writing styles might be fitted in more easily.

References


*Christine Calfoglou* (xkalfog@yahoo.gr) was a University of Athens MA in Translation and Translation Theory scholar and obtained a PhD in Applied Linguistics and Language Acquisition from the University of Athens with distinction. She is currently teaching on the M.Ed. TESOL programme of the Hellenic Open University, for the Literacy module of which she has written a volume. Her research interests and published work include distance learning methodology, L2 writing instruction, grammar, the semiotics of language and art, poetry translation, translation theory.
Book review

Stylish Academic Writing.

Helen Sword has produced a beautifully written and well-structured style guide based on the principle that “elegant ideas deserve elegant expression,” although the serious reader quickly realizes that there are also social and philosophical dimensions included, making it definitely much more than that. Aiming to be useful to writers of all disciplines, she defines stylish academic writing very broadly. To make this definition applicable and viable for all writers, she maps this difficult terrain with mathematical precision based on painstaking research from which she distills a number of stylish elements that will augment the quality of expert penmanship in general. Sword is a noted literary scholar by training, having received her PhD in Comparative Literature from Princeton University, and is now Professor and Director of the Centre for Learning and Research in Higher Education at the University of Auckland. Additionally, she is an award-winning teacher, and poet who has published widely on modernist literature. At the same time she is a prolific writer on higher education pedagogy, digital poetics, and academic writing, not to mention that she has written more than 5 single-authored books. Her fervent support for creativity and craftsmanship in scholarly writing, teaching, and the arts, won her the highly coveted University of Auckland’s 2007 Teaching Excellence Award for Innovation in Teaching as well as the 2013 HERDSA-TERNZ Medal for a scholar who has actively contributed and positively influenced tertiary education research in New Zealand.

This short professional biography is revealing in that the book under review lays out some of the problems faced by academic writers of all disciplines in both branches of human knowledge -- sciences and humanities -- whose prose for the most part appears to be entrenched in hollow conventions. For that reason, the book offers multiple strategies to help reinvigorate the already existing writing norms that have proven to be counterproductive so far and adds a number of new ones that have metaphorical and literary value. She presents samples and discusses both the stylistic elements that asphyxiate the energy and individuality of authentic expression as well as those that could produce the opposite effect but which were, and still are, ignored by writers as we speak. To this end, Sword simultaneously analyzes books and articles by more than 70 exemplary authors (whom she characterizes as “stylish academic writers”) proposed by their discipline-based peers, whose style indeed exemplifies and incorporates the criteria described in her book. Furthermore, she offers valuable advice to beginning and seasoned researchers on how to avoid a dull and anemic writing style. To correct the situation she specifically wrote
Stylish Academic Writing which is, guaranteed, both accessible and illuminating for any reader truly interested in refining their writing capabilities.

The advantage of this guide over others is that Sword brings massive research to bear on the tacitly-accepted malaise of academic writing. Plowing through numerous journals from a wide spectrum of disciplines, she discovered that the stylistic recommendations in the how-to literature were not being followed, since most of the published articles display a "kind of disciplinary monotony, a compulsive proclivity for discursive obscurantism and circumambulatory diction." (p. 3) I applaud Sword for daring to lift the mantle that has for long been cloaking one of the best well-kept secrets of academia -- that most academic prose is laden with jargon, abstractions, impersonality and obfuscation. What makes her book unique is that she furnishes copious data to substantiate her claims; for instance, she actually counts down to the last detail like: how often the first-person pronoun is used in the hundreds of articles analyzed. Likewise, she measures how often and how well they use all the stylistic machinations for eloquence she outlines in the book. (I will be referring to these technical devices later and I will also be listing them in the endnotes for the benefit of interested readers). Sword challenges writing practitioners to write clearly and with readability as the ultimate goal. Unwilling to deceive and to pamper, she stresses that learning how to write stylishly is a lifelong process that involves patience, pain, and a lot of hard work but, in the end, the experience reaped is both pleasurable and intellectually rewarding. Elaborating further, she also urges scholars to adopt techniques that we commonly encounter in newspapers and literary texts, such as metaphors, analogies, anecdotes, phrasal verbs, humor and catchy titles. Asked how her new book came about, she responded that prior to writing Stylish Academic Writing and its companion piece The Writer’s Diet, she had conducted some workshops on writing, during which she observed that the divide between the stylistic strictures proscribed in standard guide books and the actual academic writing practice continues to widen.¹

Practicing what she preaches, Sword concocts an architectural metaphor to consolidate her agenda as a stylish writer that celebrates the use of metaphors to explain and concretize abstract ideas. The promotion of anecdotes and many other carefully chosen rhetorical devices, she is convinced, intensifies the readers’ interest and comprehension of professional writing. Accordingly, she compares the eagerness of academic authors to extend warm welcome to the reading public out there to a hospitable host, who airs his/her long-time hermetically sealed house, by throwing the windows and doors wide open and by decorating the interior with bright colors -- acts intended to make it cozy, aesthetically appealing, and inspiring to all its guests. Sword continues to push academics to be more daring in acquiring their freedom from the tight corset of disciplinary and institutional stylistic constraints that are by now stale and passé, and yet manage to transmit the abstract ideas of their subjects in an understandable way. In laying out the plan of her book, she interviewed many top experts in their respective fields to find out about their views on writing, their daily writing habits; how they learned their craft; the sort of emotions they associate with their writing, and what skills were needed to push against the fossilized stylistic conventions they encountered, as well as developing the kind of psychological defenses to deal with criticism and rejection. To reiterate: the book is a writing guide that is relevant to graduate/post-graduate students and career academics alike. It is packed with tips capable of revivifying scholarly writing by freeing it from all the negative elements that chokes it to death, thus making it more engaging for the reader.

The slogan ‘publish or perish’ is by now a painful and sometimes much ridiculed cliché which, nevertheless, still doggedly obliges professors at research universities,
internationally, to produce a lengthy list of papers published in peer-reviewed journals and books. Ms Sword claims that the bulk of those journals are filled with articles that make for a boring, inane and ultimately frustrating read -- even to members of the academic communities themselves, because they are full of jargon, nominalizations, and run-on (i.e., loosely punctuated) sentences. To encapsulate this preliminary encomium of the book, let us hear a confirmation of what was sketched above from the horse’s mouth: “The seeds for this book were sown when, several years ago, I was invited to teach a course on higher education pedagogy to a group of faculty from across the disciplines. Trawling for relevant reading materials, I soon discovered that higher education research journals were filled with articles written in a style that I, trained as a literary scholar, found almost unreadable." (p 4) Moreover, “At every turn, we found our desire to learn thwarted by gratuitous educational jargon and serpentine syntax” (p 5).

Concerning the book’s structure, I will start with the analytic methodology Sword follows, that covers the entire spectrum of fictive and non-fictive writing. For starters, as aforementioned, from the writings of more than 70 expert academics across a variety of disciplines selected, she extracts the stylistic characteristics which happen to reflect or agree with the linguistic requirements she advocates. The book is divided into two parts and concludes with an Afterward which summarizes the verbal and structural guidelines prescribed. Part I entitled “Style and Substance” is comprised of 3 interesting chapters, (Rules of Engagement; On Being Disciplined; A Guide to the Style Guides), which set the theoretical stage upon which she defines her view of ‘stylish’ penmanship. Part two appropriately called “The Elements of stylishness” is symmetrically structured around eleven short but extremely fascinating chapters, each engaging with a specific stylistic issue that collectively form the backbone of good writing from start to finish -- i.e., from the title, to the structure, the language and figures of speech used, to meticulous research and accurate citations, all crowned by the creativity necessary for the successful completion of the whole endeavor. More generally, the individual chapters bristle with novel suggestions for improving university assignments, doctoral dissertations and scholarly articles that could be easily implementable after some training in the form of workshops or courses. A section on the writing process itself with specific reference to the academic essay is also attached to each chapter. As Ms Sword asserts: “Stylish scholars … [should] express complex ideas clearly and precisely; produce elegant, carefully crafted sentences; convey a sense of energy, intellectual commitment, and even passion; engage and hold their readers’ attention; tell a compelling story; avoid jargon, except where specialized terminology is essential to the argument; provide their readers with aesthetic and intellectual pleasure; and write with originality, imagination, and creative flair” (p 8).

In fact, Sword masterfully orchestrates four different strands of research in one fell swoop: (1) a survey of what the aforesaid 70 colleagues consider ‘stylish’ writing in their fields; (2) a critical examination of about 100 books, selected by them, that fulfill the ‘stylish’ characteristics singled out; (3) a detailed analysis of 1000 typical articles that covers a wide range of disciplines, and (4) a perceptive assessment of the advice given by authors of style manuals. (The sources as well as the research methodology of Sword’s book are minutely recorded in the rather lengthy appendix). This corpus may seem insufficient but it is fully representative and, as she assures us, “the articles in [her] data set provide a compelling snapshot of contemporary scholarship at work.” (p 11) Concurrently, each chapter flashes the “Spotlight” (a telling title for the penultimate subdivision at the end of each chapter) on a couple of excerpts from stylish authors, which illustrate and consolidate the expressive points already discussed therein. Furthermore, each chapter is capped with a short section (Things to Try) that is cram-full with astute ideas on how authors could improve and enrich
their writing skills. This section is also of significant pedagogical function since it contains a variety of new and existing writing technicalities as well as exercises and tasks for the classroom that teachers will undoubtedly appreciate. Each chapter also contains several brief multi-disciplinary samples, followed by page-long interludes that dish out helpful instructions regarding the practices of both stylish and non-stylish writers -- to use Sword’s appellation -- and for confronting and managing the commonly met obstacles to successful writing.

Overall, Sword imbues every serious writer with a sense of liberation by empowering them to color their prose with a sense of humor and some controlled passion. What makes Stylish Academic Writing amenable to everybody in the writing business is that Jason-like it exhibits the two faces of academic writing: the vivid and semi-literary à la Sword as well as the one burdened with abstractions and inanity. Put differently, she has designed a book that helps every researcher in their journey through the thorny path of good writing. Rather than becoming acquainted with the specific stylistic features of academic writing through time-consuming and botchy experimentation, this handy resource will speed up the knowledge and application of the key requisites that underlie formal papers. Unfortunately, “journals do not hold a monopoly on dismal writing” she concludes (p 5) because, as Ken Hyland proves, disciplinary discourse has itself been influenced by conventions that insist polished prose must be bland, impersonal, and full of abstract language. Sword is not alone in expressing dissatisfaction with this stylistic trend, and she enumerates many excellent academic writing guides already on the bookshelves, like William Zinsser, for instance, who identifies “humanity and warmth” as the two most important qualities of effective nonfiction (On Writing Well: An Informal Guide to Writing Nonfiction (New York: Harper & Row, 1980, p 6); Joseph M. Williams who argues that “we owe readers an ethical duty to write precise and nuanced prose” (Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace, 9th ed. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007, 221), and Peter Elbow who urges authors to construct persuasive arguments by weaving together the creative and critical threads of their thinking (Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

Closer to Sword’s stylistic perspective are Richard A. Lanham, who offers strategies for ‘trimming lard-laden sentences’ (Revising Prose, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), and Strunk and White who describe the reader as “a man floundering in a swamp” that will surely thank academic writers for hoisting him onto solid ground as quickly as possible (p 68). Despite the readers’ frequent disorientation in the cold and unwelcome chambers of much of the arcane volumes of academic books and journals, nowhere in Stylish Writing are the rules touted written in stone; to the contrary, the author’s empirical evidence flouts the proverbial one-size-fits-all formulas regarding formal writing and creative productivity. Sadly, she remarks: “Although many instructors commonly assign these books [writing guides] to students, for some unknown reason they hardly ever adopt their advice” (p 6).

Sword appears to give English language teachers and university professors the benefit of a doubt when she claims that they are not enforcing a standard of dull and conventional writing on students in order to punish them; rather, they are promoting scholarly dreariness because they think it is in their students’ best interest, since they equip them with a long-lasting survival kit full of writing skills that, they falsely assume, most editors of journals and university presses desire and expect. Besides, the colleagues’ recurring bland manner of writing seems to offer comfort that soon their aspiration to be inducted into their field’s elite club will materialize. Lest she be accused of lecturing from her high horse, she notes
that the question she wants to address here “is not so much why academics write the way they do but how the situation might be improved” (p 7).

In a nutshell, Sword’s final judgment on the way writing guides deal with points of style as a whole is the following: The six on which they all agree is the need for clarity, precision and concision; the use of active verbs, and creating a compelling story; the six they disagreed upon were the scant use of the 1st person pronoun, structure and the overuse of obscure terminology, among others. They also argue that ‘stylish’ academic writing is a complex and often contradictory business in which we continuously stumble upon many grey areas. To strengthen her case further, Sword elaborates on two significant parts of speech; namely, the necessary appearance of active verbs and the need to limit fake nouns, which she terms “zombie nouns”, in masterly writing.

Parenthetically at this point, I would like to expand on the function of active verbs and empty nouns by referring to two interesting articles that clarify how and why they can poison our writing style. In “Mutant Verbs” Sword defines ‘verbifying’ as the act of creating a new verb from another part of speech. Of course any noun can be verbed, so can many adjectives -- for example, we can prettify a room, neaten our desk and brown a piece of meat. Like some deviant mutation in nature, most newly-coined verbs like Mondayize, speakify, Californicate, will not be long-lived. Sword wonders for how long we will say Google and Facebook our friends? It remains a mystery to linguists why some nouns mutate into verbs while others fail to do so. Thus we horse around, outfox our enemies, parrot a phrase, grouse about the weather, but we do not penguin or giraffe. By the same token, the recent fad with the use of -ize and -iATon might also be temporary. Inevitably, “some neologistic verbs will find their way into our dictionaries and our daily lives,” but will Wikialize ever be established for use permanently in the light of day? In the hands of a genius, mutation from verbs to nouns and vice versa, no doubt enrich the English language; on the other hand, when our employer or teacher asks us to solutionize instead of to solve, we shudder at their ignorance or bad taste.  

In “Zombie Nouns” Sword reports that if you look at the following parts of speech; namely, an adjective (implacable) or a verb (calibrate) or even a noun (crony) and attach a suffix like -ity, -tion or -ism, you have automatically created a new noun: implacability, calibration, and cronyism. These nominal creations are loved by academics; lawyers, bureaucrats and business writers, but Sword sarcastically names them “zombie nouns” because “they cannibalize active verbs, suck the lifeblood from adjectives and substitute abstract entities for human beings which fail to tell us who is doing what in the sentence.” If we eliminate or reanimate most of the zombie nouns (tendency becomes tend, abstraction becomes abstract) and add a human subject and some active verbs, et viola, the sentence miraculously comes alive; otherwise, the full or clear transmission of the message will be blocked. At best, true nominalizations help us express complex ideas: perception, intelligence, epistemology; at worst, there is communication breakdown. The language used should remain firmly embedded in the physical world by using concrete language. Subsequently she clarifies: “To get a feeling for how zombie nouns work, release a few of them into a sentence and watch them sap all of its life[,]” but also watch it become the epitome of obfuscation, inanity, and abstraction.  

The fuel that pumps the engine of ‘stylish’ writing must contain six substances which Sword calls the 6 Cs’: communication, craft, creativity, concreteness, choice and courage. These features facilitate the understanding of the abstract content that is an inevitable constituent of any disciplinary writing. As a result, the reading of academic papers becomes not only pleasurable but smooth sailing. [All examples were derived from the original articles.]
Abstraction breeds boredom; to that effect, Sword points to an essay ("Professional Boredom,"?) by William Cronon, president of the American Historical Association, who talks about writing that builds walls to keep readers out rather than pulling them down to invite them in. Authors are responsible for inoculating their writing against “jargonitis,” as Sword states, turning this habit into an addiction or a disease to which a cure must be sought pronto. As we said earlier, she cautions that not following her stylistic prescriptions will result in dull and ineffective work. Similarly Cronon, a pro in how to make history appealing to non-historians, urges his peers to resist the temptation of narrowing down the field to accommodate only a high-brow audience, and in lieu “continue to reach beyond [their] professional circles to a public that includes not just an educated citizenry[,]” He is confident that “by welcoming into the general intellectual community whoever shares our passion for the selected subject of their heart or choice [,]” we can eliminate boredom. Sword reminds us that whatever we plan to teach or write, our responsibility as educators must be top priority. That means we are obliged to share our knowledge by transmitting it in a comprehensible fashion. Maintaining a wide appeal is the goal. Echoing Sword, Cronan is proud that professional historians have succeeded in deleting from their work all the elements she considers to be detrimental to writing. As educators we are driven to seek fruitful intellectual dialogue and camaraderie with a lay as well as with an educated public.

To make what she preaches accessible to all, she has designed a user-friendly website, called The Writer's Diet (www.writersdiet.com), borrowing Lanham’s fitness metaphor referred to earlier, who talks about getting rid of the ‘lard factor’ in writing. To determine if your prose passes the health test, you can post a representative written specimen, of a set length 100 to 1,000 words long, and the program will assess it from fit to flabby; for example, it will detect the vibrancy of your verbs, noun density, proliferation of prepositions, needless modifiers, and “nutritionally bankrupt words” like demonstrative pronouns. It is an essential App for all writers to familiarize themselves with as they can coincidentally grasp the fundamentals of writing while using it. And who knows, perhaps they would stand a better chance of having the massive doors of publishing houses open and ready to greet them if and when they decide to knock. [For an optical view of the diagnostic online card see the Endnotes]. But remember: To shrink the distance between “flabby” and “fit,” it is not enough to just get rid of redundant words; “avoid the clotted cream of jargon,” and steer clear of writing “uninspiring, cookie-cutter prose,” but to create “vigorous sentences” that are “nourished with high-quality ingredients” (as she light-heartedly describes in an interview). To complete the comparison, the mandatory diet advised above is the equivalent to eating balanced meals rather than junk food, and then allow your writing to undergo a workout until it emerges trim and toned and, therefore more appealing. Moving along with her ‘diet’ metaphor, Sword contends that The Writer’s Diet website is not about “skinnying down” our writing,” but more about taking “it for a workout.” When all is said and done, the Writer’s Diet Test is a fascinating and useful tool for reflection and an aid to proper editing. Sweating over one’s writing initiates and fosters interaction; hence Sword tells Jesse Mulligan “Many writers don’t understand that really readable prose is the result of hard work.” Logically speaking of course: "Somebody's gotta do the work – so either the author's doing the work to make it readable or the reader's doing the work to try to figure out what the hell they're saying” . She indicates further: “Writing is a complex, emotionally fraught task for nearly all academic writers,” nevertheless, it is the writer’s duty not to pass on the buck to the reader to decode or to misconstrue their work altogether, which shows they disrespect their fans to say the least.

Quite frankly, when it comes to computer programs evaluating prose, the cards scarcely produce reliable data. Even Sword admits that composition teachers should bear in mind
that automated paper grading tends to yield precarious results. Regrettably, such solutions have gradually seeped into our primary school education for the sake of producing speedy marks collection in standardized tests. The difference of these programs with Sword’s is like night and day because she insists on heavy-duty training prior to technical dependence. The celebrated e-Rater, the automated reader developed by the Educational Testing Service, for instance, can grade a phenomenal 16,000 essays in 20 seconds. The high numbers should alert us to the danger imminent in such programs, which reward big words and long sentences, while ignoring the actual content and writing style of essays, -- the very antithesis of what she believes and campaigns for. Finally, she asserts that the online Writer’s Diet Test is not designed to judge, reprimand or shame writers but to help them; in fact, it should be taken with a grain of salt. After all, as she has confirmed lately, “Great writing can’t be reduced to an algorithm”.

To round off Helen Sword’s philosophy of good writing, mention must be made to another diagnostic tool for assessing the working habits of a writer, which goes by the acronym BASE. With this additional online system, we begin to see how her view of writing is multi-dimensional, and delivers a more spherical or holistic approach lacking in previous writing guides, mainly because it takes into account the emotional and social aspects of the author in the pre-and-while writing stages. Incidentally, the totality of her vision on acquiring masterful scholarly skills can be deduced only by reading Stylish Academic Writing, The Writer’s Diet A Guide to Fit Prose, and Air & Light & Time & Space How Successful Academics Write in tandem. Based on interviews with 100 academic writers and 1200 responses to an anonymous questionnaire about academic writing, Sword has selected four writerly ‘habits’ that are reflected in our writing attitudes, practices, and output. She maintains that more than 80 percent of how-to literature centers on behavioral and artisanal habits alone, but she also prefers to showcase the social and emotional facets of the writing experience as well. In this case, too, there is a free online version available. It draws for those who tap into it a personal profile at the push of a button, along with oodles of technical advice on how a graduate student and a professional writer can broaden and deepen the BASE on which they can structure and express ideas stylishly in their work -- to use Sword’s construction metaphor once again. That means that her book cannot simply be considered a writing manual but also a sociological and anthropological study of academic writing to boot. In essence, successful academics found their writing practice on four pillars she identifies as the BASE of the “house of writing” without which no “home improvement” can proceed. They appear below as itemized in Toor’s review:-

- **Behavioral habits** center on discipline, persistence, and thinking out of the box. They can flourish faster by deviating from set formulas and rules devised by others. As Sword affirms: conventions are simply trends not laws to which we must forever be enslaved.
- **Artisanal habits** include skills of craftsmanship, editing and polishing your work. According to Sword, few academics enroll in an accredited course or consult a *bona fide* mentoring scheme before deciding to write professionally in their field of interest. It follows that their writing, which plays such a significant role in their academic advancement, is left up to luck, leaving open the possibility as to whether their entire career will sink or stay afloat.
- **Social habits** comprise certain behaviors such as team work, cooperation, and collegiality, which are imperative in bringing about the social aspect of writing. Sword is convinced that scholarly writing is basically a group activity not an individualistic one. Since two brains are better than one for producing more effective results, it is best to generate positive social habits around writing. One way of doing that is by opening windows of opportunity for students and profs to share in the writing process itself as
well as in the revision/editing of the finished product for the purposes of exchanging feedback that will help cultivate a superior product.

- **Emotional habits** have been introduced by Sword in order to firmly establish the positive aspect of writing rather than just harping on the negative emotions with which we are all too familiar. However for those who manage to master the craft, the pleasure and satisfaction ensuing from the experience are truly the crown jewels. With her stylish guidelines Sword drives home the message that the exasperating and horrific feelings every writer has to overcome should not be regarded as an obstacle to successful writing, but as a motivational factor that can induce and foster inspiration and creativity.

Writers often wonder if their arguments sound convincing; if their research is well-documented; if their sentences are flat or flaccid; more importantly, they agonize over whether they are smart enough to be admitted into the elite club of their own field. In an effort to reframe negative emotions about writing, Sword again uses metaphors. Instead of describing the writing enterprise using adjectives like ‘fiddly,’ ‘finicky,’ and ‘laborious,’ she substitutes them with metaphors like sculpting, crafting, molding, and polishing. But enough of the well-deserved encomiums at this point! For a review to fulfill its function to the fullest, the praise must be counteracted by spotting at least a couple of defects or contradictions in her theories of stylish writing. To be fair, I had to read long and hard between the lines in order to decipher some of the adverse implications in the book and to decide if Sword’s suggestions and solutions to the problems facing instructors attempting to train students in the stylish method of writing were adequately answered. Let us see how well the book has fared. Running a crash test on Sword’s entire theories of good writing, I came across several inconsistencies.

The first oxymoron that springs to mind after a serious reading of her stylish guideline is the curious mix in an academic paper of subjective elements, like the felt presence of the workings of the imagination, the inclusion of the 1st person pronoun, anecdotal interpolations, and personal opinion, alongside the necessary existence of objective research, which by its very nature, demands the exclusion of the self and of personal bias. As students, we are being hammered from the start to follow strict objectivity so as to achieve high grades in all areas of learning. But here is the conundrum: a) Personal pronouns may not be appropriate for formal writing, and b) how can a fresher specify what exactly a scholarly voice is; or how to distinguish between the academic and the journalistic styles; most crucially, how can a an academically inexperienced student transition to graduate-level writing which must be sifted through solid research. As a result, university students and academics are constantly struggling to find their voice in an environment that superimposes objectivity over subjectivity in writing. Naturally, there are some elements of writing to consider when facing a scholarly audience: word choice, tone, and effective use of evidence. Here are Sword’s guidelines on these problematic issues. To be on the safe side, before attempting to write, you should ask yourself the following:

- Is my paper objective?
- Am I using sufficient literature to support my assertions?
- How can I communicate with a wider readership?

Granted that employing these rules will ensure impartiality; after which your writing will become lucid, concise, and without excesses -- an approach that will allow your content to shine through. But how can a sophomore reach this conclusion without being seized by fear and hesitation -- not counting going through repeated trials and errors and, consequently,
receiving poor grades? Must not the instructors also be educated in stylish writing first? Should there not be an overhaul in the way academic writing is being taught before we expect our students to adopt it as a writing style? Sword’s answers to these questions are somewhat fuzzy, even though the initial problem is marginally suggested but without proposing any concrete solutions.

For instance, regarding the use of the personal pronoun she attempts a faint solution: “Those who choose a mixed mode (personal pronouns with an impersonal voice or third-person pronouns with a subjective voice) must work through the potential inconsistencies of their personal-yet-distanced stance. Notably, those who favor third-person, impersonal prose need to ask themselves what they are trying to achieve by suppressing personal agency[.] …” (p 43) Most academics publish books and articles because they hope, on some level, to change their readers’ minds because, as Sword affirms: “When we muzzle the personal voice, we risk subverting our whole purpose as researchers, which is to foster change by communicating new knowledge to our intended audience in the most effective and persuasive way possible. Indeed, attention to audience is a hidden but essential ingredient of all stylish academic writing. One simple way to establish a bond with readers is to employ the second-person pronoun you, either directly or by means of imperative verbs, a mode particularly favored by philosophers and mathematical scientists.” (p 44) It is not clear in the book what an appropriate use of the first person is? As an English language tutor, I fail to find any instructional method that will help me train beginning students acquire this sense, despite the extended commentary she lays out on the numberless excerpts related to the language points dealt with in each chapter. For how can using the personal pronoun and anecdotes jive with objectivity? It is a fine balancing act for the writer to juggle -- a skill that will take time to convey to our students, especially, when most of the articles in peer-reviewed journals do not follow Sword’s guidelines as she complains throughout the book.

The second oxymoron is how to handle the hurdle of disciplinary jargon of which Sword devotes a big chunk of chapter ten entitled “Jargonitis”. Of course, most academics are familiar with the specialized vocabulary of their field and are aware of its significance but, she expects them to also acknowledge that it is a necessary evil. Though she characterizes it as a disease, one wonders how can experts manage to express the fundamental ideas of their subject clearly to a wider audience without it. She advises proper use and with measure. But how can that be accomplished? I suppose (but Sword is silent on the point) it would be incumbent upon the author to define the various terms for the general public. Clarifying further, set terms like ‘end-stage renal disease’ in the medical field or the ideas of ‘scaffolding’ and ‘differentiation’ in teaching require prior knowledge on the readers’ part, so the author could explain their meaning in a footnote, giving the reader of an article the ability to follow the general flow of the piece through a thorough comprehension of its contents. In scholarly work, the writer is expected to have original thoughts on the issue at hand, but those insights must be grounded in research, critical reading, and analysis rather than personal experience or opinion. To take the former path, writers have to cite sufficient sources to immunize their writing from scattered personal or public opinions which are unsubstantiated by nature. Instead, the writer’s opinion is welded subtly and dexterously with the information from multiple sources to formulate a unique synthesis that will allow him/her to persuade the reader. Again, the how-to of the matter practically for the teacher in the classroom is vague.

The third oxymoron is Sword’s insistence on anchoring abstract ideas firmly in concrete language where metaphor looms large. Realistically however, weak and confused metaphors
could involve the reader and writer in a deadly game of thorns. For thinking metaphorically means that our students are exposed to the study and enjoyment of literary works -- something that with the advent of technology has faded into the background, and along with the reading of literature, the loss of stylish writing as well. Being well-versed in literature would also be demanded of academic writers in all fields -- something which is not feasible, or even sensible, to anticipate from a scientist for example. The book lays out precisely how academics could bridge or control their addiction for stodgy and unreadable prose and compose intelligible and cogent papers instead. Instructors already competently train their students to bypass mechanical and grammatical problems. For the most part, stylistic glitches result from poor craftsmanship: perhaps the author has tried to cram three or four major ideas into a single sentence, or accumulated several subordinate clauses in one badly punctuated sentence. Such errors are mostly grammatical and syntactical, and are a far cry from teaching students to come to grips with stylishness. Concomitantly, Sword's insistence that stylish writers should tell compelling stories (the definition of this loaded literary term is not clear-cut; how would a medic interpret the word!!), and show a humorous attitude when examining serious medical and philosophical subjects (again, what kind of humor is in good taste or appropriate when examining serious subjects), supplies the reader with "aesthetic and intellectual pleasure," while it allows academics to write with "originality, imagination, and creative flair." On the other hand, this writerly direction may create anxiety, stylistic dilemmas, even annoyance, in many students and academics that were taught engaging in a flashy and/or personal type of writing, will make them come across as banal, ridiculous, and self-indulgent -- these stylistic features being diachronically reserved for literary practices.

By way of rounding off my critique, as an instructor of English language and literature, I am aware of how difficult it is for most students to differentiate between journalistic, literary and academic prose. Besides, many may have read insufficient amounts of literary or poetic works. We expend a great deal of effort to show our students how to imitate an academic style, which really translates into an impersonal, abstract style with scarce or no metaphorical or literary ornamentation. As teachers we should make stylish writing the norm before we push our students to take the chance to use it professionally; otherwise, we could end up confusing or giving them mixed signals. Admittedly, both teachers and students could probably derive good advice from Sword's book; for instance, instructing our learners to structure their papers well and improve the sentences that are, as Sword says, “rotten at the core” by keeping nouns and verbs close together; using concrete nouns and dynamic verbs; “de-cluttering” their writing from unnecessary words, thus substantially reducing the word count down to what is absolutely functional. Getting rid of litter not only liberates your writing from what Sword calls “long-winded” and “slow-moving” sentences, but it also means minimizing adjectives and adverbs that are useless. That will enable our graduates deal with their research topic in a precise and clear manner.

Once and for all, Sword bursts the bubble that skilled academicians continually crank out fine prose instantaneously, confessing that she turns out a lot of rough drafts and not a one-take finished product. It’s no wonder then she views academic writing as a laborious and time-consuming craft that eventually gets molded into a beautiful object. As she confides to a reviewer: “I’ve come to recognize that slow writing and meticulous editing are not ‘bad habits’ that can or should be changed; they’re simply my way of working.” In chapter 11 entitled “Structural Designs” Sword chooses essayist Annie Dillard, who following in her footsteps, describes writing as an architectural endeavor, stitched together like a “continuous cycle of design, demolition, and rebuilding[,]” where “[s]entences are the bricks; paragraphs are the walls and windows: Some of the walls are bearing walls; they
have to stay, or everything will fall down. Other walls can go with impunity. ... Unfortunately, it is often a bearing wall that has to go. ... Knock it out.” Dillard’s metaphor focuses on the emotional aspect of the writing process, “which involves destruction as well as production, short-term losses as well as long-term gains.” Academic writers do not as a rule submit to William Wordsworth’s motto of indulging in a passionate overflow of powerful feeling when writing, because they think of themselves primarily as “craftspeople who regard their texts as intricate, labor-intensive structures that must be carefully planned and meticulously built, from the pouring of the foundation and the sourcing of the materials to the final polishing of the banisters— not to mention those rare but wrenching occasions when the wrecking ball must be called in” (pp 121-2).

Meanwhile, let us return to the construction metaphor again, this time not simply to zoom in on the rhetorical and structural pronouncements on good writing, but also to underscore the deficient and shoddy ones, thereby establish the Swordian stylistic benchmark more clearly. Here is what Sword thinks about the minor role of section headings play in a paper: “In a conventionally structured academic article, section headings function like centrally positioned, neatly labeled doorways that lead us from one well-proportioned room to the next. In a uniquely structured article, by contrast, we never quite know where we are going or why, unless the author makes a special effort to keep us on track. In some humanities articles, the section headings feel more like partitions randomly inserted to break up a cavernous space than like the coherent components of an architectural plan: A well-structured article or book, like a well-built house, requires careful thought and planning.” (pp 129-130) Gleaning more insights from the architectural metaphor, Dillard deploys more comparisons:

I think there are two types of writers, the architects and the gardeners. The architects plan everything ahead of time, like an architect building a house. They know how many rooms are going to be in the house, what kind of roof they’re going to have, where the wires are going to run, what kind of plumbing there’s going to be. They have the whole thing designed and blueprinted out before they even nail the first board up. (pp 252-3)

Not forgetting that there is a negative streak to obsessive organization and control, we must take Dillard’s lead and ask: “Does not the super preparation sap the life-blood out of writing? . . . I’m torn between the two paths opened before the academic writer and confused as to whether that type of writing is creative or academic. It seems to me there is a difference.” (p 254) I have debated earlier the nebulous distinction between scholarly and literary writing and Sword’s eagerness to combine both, but here Dillard justifies my qualms. In the metaphor, the poet who is more creative and directed by his imagination or inner light is designated as ‘gardener’. Architects, along with their engineers, create a precise and detailed blueprint before construction commences -- the academic author has to work in the same manner.

On the other hand, I would ask my students to keep the personal voice, relevant anecdotes, and striking analogies rather low in their assignments, and later in their professional work, until they conduct a search to ascertain whether such technical tactics are accepted by their disciplines, publishers or institutions. Similarly, we could explain to students that certain rules are not written in stone, but that at various stages in their studies and careers they may need to learn how to write in different styles.
The fourth oxymoron arises, according to Sword, from the blatant inconsistencies she perceives between the guidelines of major journals; standard style guides like MLA, Chicago, APA, which she also enumerates in *Stylish Academic Writing*, and the quality of writing practices of academics we commonly read in most books and reviews. Some of these misconceptions as we mentioned earlier include the banning of the first-person pronouns or the wholesale preference of the passive voice. Frankly speaking, the four incongruities referred to demand a serious re-orientation of our educational system -- especially with regards English language teaching -- before Sword’s stylish agenda can be implemented.

Concluding this section, scholarly writing necessitates careful citation of sources and the presence of a bibliography or reference list that denotes grappling with the larger body of literature on the topic that belongs to the wider intellectual community. The mechanical characteristics of scholarly writing are: avoiding bias; strong introductions and conclusions; effective paragraphing; building and organizing academic arguments throughout the paper; especially in the body; overall cohesion and logical flow; gluing the paper together with linking words and phrases, and demonstrating solid critical thinking -- to record the most basic. Revision, reflection, and editing, top off the life cycle of a paper that has to be completed before submission for publication.

*Stylish Academic Writing* exhibits superbly all the factors that can obstruct research originality and clear communication. Academic writing is a special genre of writing that endorses and enforces its own set of rules and practices. Whatever subjects you are studying and writing about, your audience (which could also embrace non-specialists) has to be able to comprehend the content of your paper or book. For this reason, the writer’s pen should act like a surgeon’s scalpel that rids the piece of work at hand from any wrong or redundant wording or poor craftsmanship and ensure that every paragraph, word, or sentence, down to the last punctuation mark, is in the right place and functions perfectly towards the total design. Hence, in order to present a convincing and persuasive argument, you have to integrate your ideas with the most recent and legitimate literature available. Writing papers, books or assignments not only allows you to come to a better understanding of the subject in a profound and analytical way, but also to use your work as a vehicle for illustrating your ability to reason and write well. Thus, if your work is to have social significance; it is vital for authors to have good communication skills.

Finally, I wish to highlight one more implication that can potentially be deduced from Ms. Sword’s book if one takes the time to read carefully. Though to give her credit, there is a latent or quiescent sociological -- and I might add philosophical/theological -- layer that she fears has disappeared from university curricula. If we scratch beneath the surface, we realize that the spread of atrophied, esoteric, and incomprehensible prose overshadows a much larger problem in contemporary higher education — the crisis of relevancy, a sense of meaninglessness vis-a-vis the material world. Involving students in an ongoing quest for truth and meaning in life is almost non-existent in today’s secular institutions of higher learning. The spiritual dearth that characterizes modern higher education has spawned many books that lament the senseless and valueless quality of the contemporary intellectual backdrop. Anthony Kronman grieves the loss of humanistic interest in higher education, blaming the lack of moral and spiritual growth partly on the decline of the liberal arts.\(^{12}\) In *Excellence Without a Soul: Does Liberal Education Have a Future?* Harry Lewis explores the inability of higher education to plunge students into endless disputations about existential matters that would precipitate or, at least, nudge their personal development. Sword goes a step further when she underlines the fact that the lack of moral stature eventually also leads to the hollowing out of academic writing. The secularization of the past 100 years may have combated superstition, narrow-mindedness, sectarianism and dogmatism but it seems to
have failed today’s youth because nothing else was substituted in its place. The incessant activity of “deconstructing” old-fashioned and conservative beliefs has backfired since it failed to nurture citizens capable of dealing with complex moral issues. This dogged view upheld by many is undermining the quality of academic writing. Warnings also come from another serious thinker, John Somerville, who presents meticulous documentation of how the rise of pluralism and relativism in North American culture usually ends in superficial talk about accepting diversity & tolerance without healing the spiritual bankruptcy that is affecting our youth today -- an attitude, reflected in a kind of writing devoid of value. Beyond just sounding alarms, these thinkers are also calling for seminal changes in higher education.

In closing, Sword’s book on academic writing is a profound reflection on the ever-widening chasm in academic culture between conventional and creative forms of expression from a range of viewpoints with special emphasis on intellectual productivity, which features not only her writing ideals but also a generous serving of easily applicable pointers for efficient writing. As pointed out earlier, her favorite slogan is that “convention is not a compulsion” and “a trend is not a law.” All the writing tools with which we are bombarded as scholars are fair game when chosen with deep knowledge and a serious approach to the craft of writing. In a well-executed article, writers should adopt both stereotypical and hybrid styles to achieve the best effect. Sword is not chucking traditional organizational skills like signposting, good paragraphing, or well-phrased thesis statements, but she is convinced that formulaic and straight-laced techniques are not the only way to organize a paper. What is more, she foregrounds the fact that there is no ‘secret sauce’ when it comes to writing: Every writer eventually discovers their way of revealing and projecting their own intellectual truths to their readers. To pick up on the diet metaphor, it is as if a dietician authorizes their patients who wish to lose weight to eat small doses of everything in order to stay trim and healthy. All in moderation is the motto; nothing is taboo unless it is used self-indulgently and in bad taste.

To muddy the waters even further, I would like to sign off by quoting Ms. Sword herself talking about the need of being able to move easily from genre to genre, choosing the best adaptable to the topic under examination as well as the inability of freezing the diverse and multifarious qualities of style in a definition: “Of course, no one can ever fully quantify style. ... Stylish writing will always remain a matter of individual talent and taste. Moreover, writing styles vary considerably according to content, purpose, and intended audience” -- a tendency she compares to the change of outfits to suit the event attended or to suit the weather. (p 11) Predating Sword, Strunk and White were voicing the same idea: “There is no satisfactory explanation of style, no infallible guide to good writing, no assurance that a person who thinks clearly will be able to write clearly, no key that unlocks the door, no inflexible rule by which the young writer may shape his course. He will often find himself steering by stars that are disturbingly in motion.” (Elements of Style, 66). Taking this dynamic option into account, academics can then begin to make informed, independent decisions about their own writing, hoping that the resulting product will be cognitively and psychologically more transparent to the general public.

Ms. Sword’s brilliant volume is not a lone voice in the wilderness, Stephen J. Payne’s Voice and Vision: A Guide to Writing History and Other Serious Non-Fiction (Harvard), is iterating the same message, that is, the creation of a personal jargon-free and vibrant prose with which authors can scramble for a wider audience than the isolated and narrow intellectual community of their academic field. In this case we can cheerfully say the more the merrier; it’s time to let a ray of sunshine brighten the dark and musty halls of academic institutions.
Despite the occasional lapses and absence of precision regarding some of her estimations and evaluations of the cannons of stylish writing, I appreciate her attempts to change the institutional status quo on academic writing. Looking around the dismal academic scene today leaves me no choice but to be a staunch supporter of her ideas. The path of academic writing and publishing still remains strewn with booby traps that can torpedo our writing at any moment with the slightest move in the wrong direction. Despite that, my final verdict is that *Stylish Academic Writing* is a pithy and thoughtful guide that can improve our writing by leaps and bounds and is therefore highly recommended.

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Notes

9. Jesse Mulligan, “Dr Helen Sword on writing,” *Language Arts* 6 Nov 2017 (From , 2:30 pm)
Special Issue on

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS AND DISSERTATIONS IN DISTANCE LEARNING WITHIN THE TESOL CONTEXT

Section Two: Feedback on academic assignments

Guest Editors: Christine Calfoglou, Anastasia Georgountzou, and Alexia Giannakopoulou

Introduction

The 10th issue of RPLTL deals with the evergreen topic of feedback in education, with a Distance Education (DE) written assignment feedback focus. Feedback is a key component of education, as it involves gauging the effectiveness of the learning process while also seeing that this process is continued and providing for its increased effectiveness in the future. In Biology, in which we can trace the origins of the term, feedback is defined as “a response within a system that influences the continued activity or productivity of that system”¹ and, even though we have largely outgrown behaviourism in education, the idea of response and its significance are still very relevant in feedback-related discussion. What has been gaining momentum, however, is a modified perception of feedback, involving its contribution to future improvement (forward-looking feedback) as well as its polyphony, namely the synergy of several forces other than the teacher or tutor in the feedback provision process. Research is thus being carried out on both teacher/tutor feedback and self-and peer assessment.

The importance of feedback, mostly in the form of written comments on students’ written assignments, is further underlined in DE, where it may be seen as compensating for the lack of face-to-face contact either with the tutor or with one’s fellow-students. It is thus evident

that this feedback has to be carefully composed so as to alleviate fears, heighten problem awareness, provide improvement pointers and spur distance learning students to fight on. Experience at the M.Ed. in TESOL programme of the Hellenic Open University has been most rewarding in terms of written assignment feedback provision and has yielded precious insight into the variables involved in distance learning feedback provision. It is essentially this insight that is being recorded in the present issue.

More specifically, Dana Ferris, in her interview, refers to the great progress made in the area of feedback provision generally and the need for individualised feedback while also pointing to the increased significance of selective correction. Dina Tsagari provides a global and comprehensive discussion of the state of the art in feedback and assessment and of related taxonomies and underlines, among other things, the importance of the feed-forward function of feedback.

Focusing on the distance learning mode and the Hellenic Open University M.Ed. in TESOL experience, Evangelia Karagianni underscores the importance of empathising in the feedback provision process. Drawing on feedback data obtained from the programme’s tutors’ assignment correction, Karagianni discusses the emphasis on the cognitive and the neglect of the affective factor in tutor feedback. Based on a rich data base, Ifigenia Kofou discusses a specific set of conditions under which feedback and assessment may affect learning and draws particular attention to the need for detailed, timely and effective feedback as encouraging further action on the part of the learner while also underlining the metacognitive and critical thinking element involved in responding to feedback.

Working on the specific type of feedback required in the distance learning mode, Georgia Kreonidou and Vassilia Kazamia point to the need for Distance Learning feedback to be adjusted to learners’ individual needs as well as for learners to develop the strategies required for feedback decoding. This, they suggest, forms part of the need for further training of distance learners in feedback reception and analysis. It is this need for individualized feedback, set within the framework of self-regulated learning, that Valentina Peroukidou and Ifigenia Kofou also talk about in their joint article. Peroukidou and Kofou also focus on the style of the feedback provided on written assignments, while also stressing the need for concrete, explicit comments as well as the idea of using written feedback as the basis of discussion.

Eleni Trigonaki discusses the strengths and weaknesses of distance learning feedback as perceived by learners themselves and focuses on the amendments proposed. In doing so, she raises the interesting issue of distance learners contributing to the formulation of the evaluation criteria used by tutors in the feedback provision process. On the other hand, Despoina Malliotaki analyses the feelings of isolation experienced by distance learners within a specific theoretical framework and proposes adopting a dialogic type of feedback which will help combat these feelings.

Finally, in their discussion of the feedback giver and receiver experience in Distance Education, Anastasia Georountzou and Christine Calfoglou explore differences between giver and receiver perceptions of the peer feedback provision process as well as the mode of peer correction. Their findings point in the direction of the dialogue involved being particularly welcome and of the broader social components of the peer feedback provision process being overlooked while power forces are also found to be at work.

Christine Calfoglou, Anastasia Georountzou, and Alexia Giannakopoulou
An interview with Professor Dana Ferris

In this interview with Christine Calfoglou, one of the special issue editors, Professor Dana Ferris discusses the various facets of written feedback, its role in writing instruction, current feedback-related research she engages in and future prospects.

Christine Calfoglou (C.C.). Professor Ferris, it is a great pleasure to be ‘talking’ to you! I would appreciate your views as a writing and feedback expert on the following issues: You have dealt with feedback issues extensively. What special attraction do they hold for you?

Dana Ferris (D.F.). Feedback is very integral to teaching writing. It represents individualized instruction and an instructor’s commitment to the students. Because of its potential and because so much teacher time is spent on it, I feel it’s important to conduct research on how feedback works and to help equip teachers to do this substantial work better.

C.C. ‘Feedback’ as a notion carries the flavor of behaviourist concepts like stimulus and response. Do you think that current feedback-related research has disentangled itself from this association? Does it need to do so?

D.F. I don’t really agree with that characterization. Again, I see it as a form of individualized instruction to student writers, not some disembodied/generic stimulus/response.

C.C. At some point in an interview you pointed out that feedback might be the most important aspect of writing instruction. Could you please elaborate?

D.F. The most important part of writing instruction is for students to write and to learn about writing and themselves as writers by so doing. Feedback is an integral part of that goal because it provides students with reactions from readers about what works and what does not.
C.C. You have conducted systematic research on written corrective feedback. Where do you feel we are at the moment? How far have we got?

D.F. I think we’ve gotten amazingly far in the last 20 years. It’s remarkable, really. In my own thinking and writing I’ve gone from “Well, maybe it works; we don’t know” to “Yes, it definitely helps, if done properly.” Future work on this topic needs to focus on the “how best” rather than the “if.”

C.C. Where do you see the dividing line between correction and feedback? Is this a still valid distinction?

D.F. The terms are used interchangeably in the literature, but I’d probably distinguish them by saying that “correction” involves providing “right answers” to students and “feedback” involves giving them information that helps them learn about writing, language, and editing processes.

C.C. A number of feedback taxonomies have emerged in the literature: Direct/indirect, selective/comprehensive, collective/individual(ised), immediate/delayed, form/content-focussed, pre-text/text-based, process/product, among others. Would you see this as labyrinthine? How have we benefited from it? Do you feel there is any one particular taxonomy that has held sway lately?

D.F. It may be “labyrinthine,” but I think it’s necessary to consider all of these issues, both as teachers and as researchers. I’d say the one most people think/argue about is the “selective/comprehensive” dichotomy.

C.C. Do you believe there are untreatable errors?

D.F. I defined “untreatable” as language features that don’t have specific rules that can be taught and learned. I’d consider lexical errors to be untreatable as well as some sentence structure errors (e.g., word order, collocations).

C.C. Dynamic Written Corrective Feedback has been defined (I am paraphrasing) as a quick focused response to short chunks of text. What lies ahead for this kind of error treatment?

D.F. The term was invented by Prof. Norm Evans at Brigham Young University (see, for example, Hartshorn et al., 2010, in TESOL Quarterly). The program I direct uses this approach in all classes. One of the Ph.D. students teaching in our program did a large study of its efficacy and student responses to it, and it will be published soon in TESOL Quarterly. We find it a very effective way to give students individualized attention on language issues and raise student awareness of patterns of error. We’re actually looking to expand its use beyond grammar errors to include vocabulary and to help promote metacognition through reflective writing.

C.C. What is your advice with regard to the treatment of content- as against form-related problems in a written text?

D.F. My advice is the same as it’s always been: be encouraging, be clear, be selective (don’t try to address everything in one feedback round), be constructive (give them advice for revision). My advice is the same whether it’s written teacher feedback or 1:1 writing conferences (teacher and student).
C.C. Process writing bloomed in the 80’s but it appears to me that, whatever its flaws, it might be the only fully-fledged writing instruction theory so far. What do you see silhouetted against the writing instruction theory horizon at the moment? And, how are changes in writing instruction theory affecting feedback theory?

D.F. In my opinion, the best “writing instruction theory” is a hybrid of process, genre pedagogy, rhetorical awareness (especially consideration of audience), and metacognition. All of those pieces should be part of any approach to teaching writing.

C.C. Would you support peer feedback in the adult community?

D.F. I’m a huge believer in peer feedback and think it’s appropriate for any writing class (or class that includes writing assignments) (see, for example, Ferris, 2007 in Journal of Second Language Writing).

C.C. Would you think there are power relationships at work in the feedback providing process? Are they inevitable or could they be mitigated somehow?

D.F. Absolutely there are power relationships, and yes, they are inevitable. Of course, teachers should treat student writers with respect and give them ideas to consider rather than commands, but let’s not kid ourselves: the teacher is still the power figure in that dynamic.

C.C. How would you describe the role of the teacher and feedback provider? Would you be happy with the term ‘informed reader’? Why/why not? Is feedback a dialogic experience?

D.F. I see the teacher as the expert and the guide. Teachers shouldn’t be afraid to share their expertise -- that’s why they’re the teacher. Feedback can be a dialogic experience, but it isn’t always or even often. The teacher typically has to build in a dialogic step in the feedback cycle (e.g., students coming in for a conference or writing a response to the feedback they received)—or it’s not likely to happen naturally. Students tend to simply accept the teacher’s authority, and teachers expect to have that authority, too.

C.C. Is there any specific written feedback format you would recommend? For example, mitigators have been found to be soothing while at the same time potentially confusing. My research suggests that questions are generally valued among adult distance learners, often because they are more tentative than statements. What do you think?

D.F. I think questions are fine as long as they’re not too abstract. Being clear and constructive -- giving students feedback they can understand and apply -- is more important than the form of the feedback.

C.C. You have spoken in favour of focused feedback. My experience as an open and distance learning educator, however, has shown that written feedback on distance learners’ written assignments may need to be exhaustive, as this is one of their few chances over the year to hear their teacher’s ‘voice’ and get some guidance, which they are desperately in need of. On the other hand, I do realize that exhaustive feedback may sometimes be overwhelming. What is your opinion? Would this be an individualized feedback issue, in the sense of calibrating one’s students needs and personality and deciding how focused or exhaustive one might be in each individual case?
D.F. By “exhaustive,” I assume you mean “comprehensive.” I think the issue is neither opportunity nor teacher exhaustion -- it’s how much feedback students can cope with and learn from. If you mark 95 different errors from 17 different categories in a four-page paper, I question how much students will understand and learn from that feedback, let alone what they’ll remember and transfer. Marking error according to repeated patterns -- and a limited number of patterns each time -- has more potential to actually help students.

C.C. Based on your experience, is there any further intuition you might have with regard to distance learning feedback? For example, would you support video-conferencing as a feedback provision channel?

D.F. Absolutely, video-conferencing is a great tool. Many writing teachers do this already, and not even in fully online environments. Even in traditional face-to-face instructional context, video conferencing provides schedule flexibility for teachers and students. Some of the newer apps and learning management system tools also allow embedded audio feedback. I think teachers should be open-minded about using technology for feedback in any way that works for both teacher and students.

C.C. What would you see as the main avenue opening up in feedback research at the moment?

D.F. - Technology and how it influences and changes the feedback process (from both teacher and student perspectives)
- How teachers learn to give good feedback (and get better at it)
- Feedback in the disciplines, not writing courses

References


Dana Ferris spent 18 years as Professor of English at California State University, Sacramento and is now Professor and Director of the University of California Davis Writing Program. Her research has focused generally on teaching second language readers and writers and specifically on response to student writing and written corrective feedback in second language writing. Her work has been published in a range of journals including TESOL Quarterly, Research in the Teaching of English, Studies in Second Language Acquisition, Journal of Second Language Writing. Her latest book is Teaching English to Second Language Learners (2018, Routledge, with Jonathan Newton, Christine Goh, William Grabe, Fredricka Stoller, and Larry Vandergrift). She is currently Co-Editor of the Journal of Second Language Writing and founding Editor of the Journal of Response to Writing.
Interface between feedback, assessment and distance learning written assignments

Dina TSAGARI

Effective feedback is regarded as one of the cornerstones of students’ development and progress (Ferris, 2008; Granville & Dison, 2009; Li, 2007). However, several areas of contention among instructors and students still exist, especially in improving academic writing skills, e.g. nature of effective feedback, students’ motivation in responding to instructors’ feedback, and so on. Within TESOL, M.Ed. programmes and distance education, this is even more challenging, as feedback is provided to non-native language users with time and interaction constraints. Therefore, feedback needs to be informative, accurate and effective and take into consideration the identities and needs of the student writers, who are themselves teachers and feedback providers. In this article, I discuss the link between feedback and assessment with particular reference to distance learning written assignments. More specifically, my discussion will be based on the following questions:

• What is the relationship between assessment and feedback?
• What are the most recent models/ways of thinking about feedback in assessment?
• What kind of assessment is used especially in Distance Learning academic contexts and how can feedback best respond to its role as part of the assessment process?
• What does the literature tell us about feedback on and assessment of writing in the Distance Learning academic context?
• What are the lessons learnt in terms of pedagogy? What are the implications of research and discussions in the area of feedback as part of assessment so far, with particular reference to distance learning written assignments?

I hope that the paper can shed some light on the seriously under-researched topic of feedback on written assignments in TESOL contexts.
apotelesmatikís anatrophodótshs, to kíntro twn mabhtwn na antapokríduv stois anatrophodótshs twn ekpiadeutwv. Enostos to chwro to TESOL (Didaktikís tis Agilikhís se Omlhtes Allwn Glwshwn), tows Metapiptitakwvn prgrammátewn sthn Ekpiadeus kai tis ex apostássews ekpaideusis, to déma tis anatrophodótshs kai tis antapókrwshs se autín eina akómy pio polúplhko, kathws h anatrophodótsh parégheta stoous mfi fvasikous omlhtes tis glwssas me periorismouws ws proos to chroño kai twn allhleipídrasia. Ows ek toútw, h anatrophodótsh prpeita na paréchéi tìn kattálhllh enhmerws, na eina akridhís kai apotelesmatikí kai na lambánhne upófis tis tautótítshs kai tis anágykes twn fwtshnwn-sughgrafwv ois otopoi échoun polllaplois rólous, dhl. éina oi ídios kai ekpiadeutikoi kai párhoi anatrophodótshs. Se autó to órðro suzhtw tì shché tis anatrophodótshs kai tis axiolónghshs me idiaitér anaforá stis grappité eragáies sthn ex apostássews ekpaideusis. Suygkeriména, to órðro básiçeta ston akóloutha evwtímtta:

• Poia eina h shché anámsa sthn axiolónghsh kai tihn anatrophodótsh;
• Poia eina tìn pio prósfrata monéla/oí pio prósfrates òwfrhshes gia tìn anatrophodótsh sthn axiolónghsh;
• Ti eídous axiolónghsh chrhsmopoiwseita idiaitéra se akadhmatiká peribálloonta ex apostássews ekpaideusis kai péw mporéi h anatrophodótsh na antapokrídei kalútera sto rólo tis ws mérous tis axiolónghtikhs diadidakias;
• Ti mas léi h bibliográrfia gia tìn anatrophodótsh kai tìn axiolónghsh twn graptwv lógyou sto akadhmatikaj peribállo nths ex apostássews ekpaideusis;
• Ti éche deízexi th éreuná mékri stigmís;
• Poia eina tis paídagnmikh swfrh pio échoume apokomíseis; Poies eina oi suvntíseis tis éreunás kai twn svztísewn mékrí sóméra ston tómya tis anatrophodótshs ws mérous tis axiolónghshwn twn graptwv eragáion sthn chýro tis ex apostássews ekpaideusis;

Elpízwn pois to paró nómporei na díafwthísei to déma tis anatrophodótshs twn graptwv eragáion sthn chýro to TESOL.

Key words: distance education, TESOL, feedback, writing, assessment

1. Introduction

Feedback is generally acknowledged as a crucial component of assessment. Tang & Harrison insightfully note that the important part of the assessment process begins when the work is marked, that is, when feedback comes in (2011, p.584). The role of feedback, though, goes far beyond the assessment process. By providing information about learners’ actual performance and guidance on intended goals and developments, feedback connects assessment to teaching and learning (Rogier 2014), influencing all aspects of effective pedagogy. This multi-layered influence has been frequently praised by authors in the field, who consider that feedback is one of the most potent influences on student learning and achievement (Jonsson, 2012, p. 63), an essential component of all learning contexts and purposes (Hatziapostolou & Paraskakis 2010, p.111), or even “the lifeblood of learning” (Rowntree, 1987, p. 24).

Despite its acknowledged significance, however, feedback lacks a generally agreed upon definition (see also Evans, 2013, p.71). In general, feedback is conceptualized as a responsive action, and, more specifically, as information about how successfully a task has been fulfilled (Tang & Harrison, 2011, p. 583). For instance, Richards defines feedback as “information
which provides a report on the result of behavior” (1992, p. 137), while Ur approaches feedback as “information that is given to the learner about his or her performance of a learning task, usually with the objective of improving this performance” (Ur, 1996, p. 242). For Hattie & Timperley, feedback is “information provided by an agent regarding aspects of one’s performance or understanding” (2007, p. 81). Connecting feedback to the learner’s performance, conceptualizations of this sort seem to suggest that feedback is an integral part of assessment. Nevertheless, insisting on the responsive and informative aspect of feedback, the aforementioned definitions conceptualize it as an end product, in the sense of some measurement instrument or a consequence of assessment (see Evans, 2013, p. 71).

Against conceptualizations approaching feedback as a product, some authors describe it as a pedagogical process or activity. Thus, Housel argues that feedback is “any information, process or activity which ‘affords’ or accelerates learning, whether by enabling students to achieve higher-quality learning outcomes that they might have otherwise attained or by enabling them to attain the outcomes sooner or more rapidly” (2003, p.1). Apart from emphasizing the procedural dimension of feedback, Housel’s definition emphasizes the fact that feedback is tightly connected to particular pedagogical purposes, such as enhancing learning and assisting students in achieving higher-level learning outcomes (see also Tang & Harrison, 2011, p.583). Similarly, Lizzio & Wilson (2008) approach feedback in functional terms, and offer a definition which considers feedback as a process serving evaluative and educative functions. According to Lizzio & Wilson, in its evaluative function, feedback provides students with information on their performance, while in its educative function, feedback facilitates students’ development and task improvement (Lizzio & Wilson, 2008, p. 263).

A conceptualization of feedback in terms of its functions has also been provided by Hattie & Timperley (2007). Hattie & Timperley distinguish four levels of feedback, corresponding to respective pedagogical functions: feedback about the task, feedback about the processing of the task, feedback about self-regulation, and feedback about the self as a person. Feedback about the task concerns information aiming at clarifying and reinforcing aspects of a learning task, feedback about the processing of the task involves information on what learners can do in progressing with a learning task, feedback about self-regulation focuses on metacognitive aspects, such as self-monitoring abilities and strategies, and feedback about the self emphasizes personal attributes. In a similar way, Nelson & Shunn (2009) postulate three main functions of feedback and categorize feedback processes accordingly: a) motivational feedback, i.e. feedback influencing learners’ beliefs and motivation to participate b) reinforcing feedback, i.e. feedback rewarding or criticizing learners’ behavior, and c) informational feedback, i.e. feedback providing information with a view to changing learners’ performance and providing guidance towards a specific learning direction.

A great amount of feedback definitions emphasize the role of feedback in pointing to the gap between a student’s actual performance and a “reference” level, that is, the performance aimed for (see, for instance, Sadler, 1989). However, this conception has received strong criticism, since it evokes an “ideal minus” model, in which feedback comments are mainly useful for indicating where and how students have fallen short of the intended performance (see Nicol, 2008). Rejecting “ideal minus” models, Chetwynd & Dobbyn argue that “threshold plus” models of feedback, in which students are praised for the extent to which they have exceeded a basic standard, might be more motivating (Chetwynd & Dobbyn, 2011, p. 68). Following Walker (2009), Chetwynd & Dobbyn assume that feedback may target either the gap between a student’s performance and the ideal in a particular assignment (retrospective feedback), or it can relate to more generic themes,
applicable to future work (future-altering feedback). Moreover, adopting Brown and Glover’s (2006) classification, Chetwynd & Dobbyn argue that feedback comments may refer to either the content of learners’ work or to more general learner skills. Combining the aforementioned distinctions, Chetwynd & Dobbyn offer a four-category functional taxonomy, in which feedback is considered as either retrospective-on-content, future-altering-on-content, retrospective-on-skills, or future-altering-on-skills (Chetwynd & Dobbyn, 2011).

The aforementioned conceptualizations seem to suggest that feedback is a fixed process or product which involves an active giver, i.e. the instructor, and a passive recipient, i.e. the learner. Conceptualizations of this sort involve a cognitivist, telling perspective on feedback, according to which feedback comments are corrective in nature and are provided by an expert to a passive recipient (see Evans 2013, p.71). Against this view, several authors have pointed out that feedback is not a fixed process in which learners’ have a passive and uniform role. Jang et al. (2015), for instance, argue that students demonstrate dynamic learner characteristics and do not merely receive feedback. Instead, students interpret feedback individually, according to their internal beliefs, perceptions and strategies (Jang et al., 2015, pp. 360-361). Emphasizing learners’ role, Hattie & Timperley (2007) claim that the process of feedback involves both giving and receiving. As they note, “students construct their world of learning and it is critical for teachers to appreciate that providing feedback is only a part of the equation” (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 13). Similarly, Barker & Pinard conceive feedback as an interface between a tutor’s teaching objectives and a student’s learning requirements (2014, p. 899). Focusing on the interactional aspect of feedback and students’ active role in the process, Guasch et al. define feedback as a dialogic interaction (2013, p. 326). Compared to the cognitivist, corrective perspective, these views seem to suggest a socioconstructivist approach to feedback. In this approach, feedback is a dialogic, dynamic process between and among students and tutors, in which comments and suggestions do not aim at dictating learning directions but at triggering dialogue, students’ reflection, and responsibility. Unlike the cognitivist view, the socioconstructivist approach does not restrict feedback to providing information; instead, it is also concerned with the reception and use of feedback comments (see Evans, 2013, p.71; Guasch et al., 2013, pp. 324-325).

For some authors, using information provided is the most crucial aspect of feedback. Sadler (1989), for instance, argues that information on student performance should be denoted as feedback only if it is used to alter the gap between current performance and the performance aimed at. If information provided is not used, then it is not feedback. For Sadler, there are three key parameters that must be met if students are to be able to use the information provided as feedback: a) students must know the performance targeted, b) students must be able to assess their performance in relation to some standards, and c) students must possess some strategies that enable them to modify their performance according to the information provided. It is conceivable that, in Sadler’s model, feedback – rather, effective feedback – cannot be guaranteed by tutors alone but involves the active participation of students. If Sadler’s model is to be generalized, then a relatively small proportion of the comments and guidance actually offered should be called feedback. As the literature reveals, students commonly fail to act upon received feedback (see, for instance, Chetwynd & Dobbyn, 2011; Johnson, 2012). One possible reason for this might lie in the quality of the feedback provided. Considering, however, that students’ failing to use feedback is widespread in most educational contexts, the assumption that students do not act upon feedback provided because the latter is of low quality does not seem to constitute an adequate explanation as to why students do not use the feedback they receive (Jonsson,
2012, p. 64). It is equally possible that students do not use the feedback they get, because they are unable to understand it, because they do not understand the assessment criteria involved, because they do not understand the discourse of the discipline or, simply, because they decide not to engage with it – especially if they see no link between assessment tasks/modules/tutors (see Price et al., 2010; Handley & Williams, 2011; Chetwynd & Dobbyn, 2011).

Feedback can also be defined with respect to its source. Thus, Alavi & Kaivanpanah (2007) distinguish between external and internal feedback. External feedback might come from teachers or from peers, in the form of peer feedback. Internal feedback involves self-regulated learners who can assess their current state and adopt appropriate learning techniques. In the latter case, feedback is rather a process of self-monitoring and it consists of knowledge which is available to learners alone (see Alavi & Kaivanpanah, 2007, p. 183). The problem with conceptualizations of this sort is that they ignore the fact that tutors, too, can receive feedback from learners (see Rogier, 2014). As Alavi & Kaivanpanah acknowledge, the feedback that teachers receive from students is an invaluable source for finding out to what extent teaching has been successful (2007, p.182). Rogier argues that assessment results can provide information to teachers and administrators for adjusting teaching practices, for guiding the curriculum, and even for reviewing curriculum objectives (2014, p.12). Ypsilandis notes that teachers commonly receive feedback from students by inviting questions to check students’ understanding of module objectives, by asking questions to check understanding of content, and by monitoring students’ reaction to content (2002, p.72). According to Ypsilandis, these commonly used methods of receiving feedback can be further supported with the addition of after class interviews with students or by collecting students’ written reports of their thoughts on a particular lecture (see Ypsilandis, 2002, p.72).

2. Effective feedback in classroom and distance education

Although scholars have provided numerous suggestions for enhancing feedback quality and effectiveness, we do not possess some definite description of effective feedback. However, drawing on previous empirical research and theoretical investigations, we can express with relative certainty the qualities and criteria that effective feedback should meet.

Focusing mainly on the instructional function of feedback, Howard (1987) argues that effective feedback design should address four important criteria: a) content of feedback, b) degree to which feedback is individualized, c) feedback immediacy, and d) the source and delivery methods used (feedback “format”, according to Howard). Concerning the content component, Howard claims that feedback must provide precise information on a learner’s correct and incorrect answers, precise information explaining why a certain answer was correct, incorrect or incomplete, but, also, precise information pointing to the skills and knowledge demonstrated by the learner’s answer. On this view, the content criterion predicts that feedback must be specific and should point to both assessed performance and learners’ demonstrated abilities. The degree of individualization in Howard’s list of criteria refers to the extent to which learners’ performance must be evaluated individually. According to Howard, assessment tasks with limited possible answers (e.g. mathematics assignments) restrict the extent of feedback individualization. Assessment tasks with multiple possible answers require more individualized evaluation and feedback. With the criterion of feedback immediacy, Howard refers to feedback timing. He acknowledges that feedback immediately following a learner’s performance is more beneficial than delayed
feedback. Nevertheless, he maintains that a short delay in the provision of feedback (e.g. one or two days) might be more beneficial for some purposes and in specific learning tasks. Hence, Howard suggests immediate feedback for tasks requiring procedural knowledge (i.e. what one can do) and relatively delayed feedback for tasks requiring declarative knowledge (i.e. what one knows). Finally, the last criterion of effective feedback in Howard’s list concerns feedback source and delivery methods. For Howard, these two parameters are interrelated and influence – to a great extent – the options for all other feedback criteria. So, for instance, pre-programmed computer feedback is highly individualized, immediate and provides limited content options. On the other hand, group conferences and seminars are immediate, more individualized – since each student can ask different questions – and more varied in content. The delivery method seems to also determine the source of feedback. Thus, tutor and peer feedback is possible in group conferences, but a priori excluded in the case of automatic, computer generated feedback. As the above discussion shows, the point in Howard’s list is not to suggest a specific set of features that feedback should possess but to indicate feedback components that tutors should take care of when designing feedback. Howard’s model points to a correspondence between assessment tasks and respective feedback characteristics, without suggesting properties that must apply in feedback generally.

A similar set of parameters for effective feedback has been provided by Price et al. (2010). Price et al. abstract away from particular methods and features and argue that effective feedback should adequately respond to three major questions: a) what is it for, b) when and how, and c) who and what. The point in the first question is that feedback has different purposes and, thus, feedback provision should be designed in accordance with the purpose set in each case. Assuming that feedback performs five main roles, i.e. correction, reinforcement, forensic diagnosis, benchmarking, and longitudinal development (feed-forward), Price et al. claim that these roles might not be equally prioritized in each educational context. In the context of higher education, for instance, the function of feed-forward appears to be more important than the corrective function. Therefore, feedback should be designed and provided accordingly. The second question in the Price et al. account refers to the content and timing of feedback. Price et al. argue that the content of feedback should conform to its purpose. So, if the purpose is just to correct errors, then the delivery of detailed corrective feedback would be sufficient for the aim at issue. If the aim is to bring effects on future learner performance, then feedback content should include more advice and suggestions for future action. The third question addressed by Price et al. functions as a reminder that feedback includes at least two major players: instructors and learners. These players have quite different views as to what counts as effective feedback. Instructors measure effectiveness according to their intentions and beliefs, while learners perceive effectiveness on the basis of their own expectations and needs. This means that the answer to Price et al.’s third question is largely dependent on who answers it. Price et al. argue that real effectiveness can only be measured by looking at the impact of feedback. However, considering the complexities involved in providing and using feedback, Price et al. remain skeptical as to whether the impact is a measurable and accurate indication. As they point out, “input measures such as timing, frequency, quantity [...] can only indicate that some of the conditions for effective feedback are in place. They cannot prove that feedback is effective” (2010, p. 280).

Against the aforementioned abstract models, some authors have provided more detailed accounts of the characteristics of effective feedback. Drawing on previous work on feedback (i.e. Giroux, 1992; Black et al., 2003; Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Juwah et al., 2004; McConnell, 2006), Hatzipanagos & Warburton (2009) presented a model of effective feedback consisting...
of feedback dimensions and corresponding feedback attributes. According to the model, effective feedback should target the following dimension: autonomy and ownership, dialogue, timeliness, visibility, appropriateness, action, community and reflection. For Hatzipanagou & Warburton, feedback should improve levels of learners’ confidence and support management of one’s own learning, in order to promote autonomy and ownership. Dialogue should be promoted by ensuring that feedback is provided often enough, by supporting peer/tutor discussions, and by allowing learners to question and respond to feedback. Timeliness requires that feedback should be prompt and in adequate quantity, while visibility requires feedback to discern learning needs and unpredicted achieved outcomes. In order for feedback to be effective, it must be comprehensible to students and it should be linked to assessment criteria and learning outcomes. Establishing task-performance-feedback cycles and helping students set personal goals promote the dimension of action, while supporting peer assessment and learning communities enhances the community aspect of Hatzipanagou & Warburton’s feedback model. Finally, encouraging reflection on the work and comparing actual performance to standards promotes the reflection dimension of feedback.

Summarizing similar theoretical approaches to effective feedback characteristics, Hatzipanagou & Paraskakis (2010) also suggested a list of features that are generally assumed to contribute to feedback effectiveness. Based on previous work on the issue (see Juwah et al., 2004; Race, 2006; Irons, 2008; Shute, 2008), Hatzipanagou & Paraskakis argue that feedback is effective when it is timely, motivational, personal, manageable and directly related to assessment criteria and learning outcomes. Timeliness suggests that feedback should be provided at a time at which students can still recall how they have addressed the assessed task, and can still incorporate suggestions provided in future work. Feedback is motivational when it is empowering, encouraging and constructive and when it avoids negative effects on students’ self-esteem. Considering that each student has unique weaknesses and strengths, effective feedback should be personal, too. This means that feedback comments, suggestions and style should be personalized and tailored to the achievements and needs of each student. The manageability criterion suggests that feedback should be detailed enough to make students understand their strengths and weaknesses, but not over-detailed, because then it risks being misleading, confusing, and non-applicable in future work. Feedback should also be linked to clear assessment criteria and standards. This link is crucial for feedback effectiveness, since it enables students to identify the gap between their actual performance and the desired learning goals. In addition to the aforementioned well-established feedback features, Hatzipanagou & Paraskakis argue that effective feedback should be effectively communicated, too, in order to enhance students’ motivation and engagement with its content.

Chetwynd & Dobbyn note that “effective feedback on assessment is nowhere more important than in distance education courses, where comments on assignments may be the principal, or even the only, learning communication between tutor and student” (2011, p. 67). Certainly, distance education exhibits certain differences compared to the classroom context. The distance that separates activities of teaching and learning and the media that are required to bridge that gap are among the most commonly cited differences between face-to-face and distance education (Bernard et al., 2009, p. 1243). Tsagari (2013) argues that distance learning education involves challenges and opportunities that are not present in the classroom context. For instance, learners in distance education have more opportunities to choose the content and the ways they learn, they have more freedom in choosing tasks and learning materials and they have the option to ignore activities that they do not consider useful for their development. On the other hand, distance learning raises
challenges that do not appear in the classroom context, such as maintaining students’ initial motivation, providing access to real time interactions and developing learners’ awareness of the rate and direction of their learning (Tsagari, 2013, p. 386).

The aforementioned differences between distance and face-to-face learning are not translated into some special feedback characteristics applying to distance learning exclusively. Instead, the relative advantages and disadvantages of distance learning indicate that the attributes of effective feedback must be manipulated appropriately in order to address the conditions applying in the distance learning context. Thus, considering the fact that distance learners work in isolation along with the high drop-out rate in distance education (see Ypsilandis, 2002, p.172), some authors emphasize the motivational role of feedback, arguing that motivation may be the most significant feature of effective feedback in the distance learning context (see Hyland, 2001, p. 234). This focus on motivation is reflected in Cole et al.’s (1986) list of essential items for effective feedback in the distance learning context. As Cole et al. argue, feedback in distance education should adopt a sympathetic and supportive approach, it should provide encouraging comments and it should also offer opportunities for dialogue and responses to feedback.

Apart from the emphasis on the motivational aspect of feedback, the particular characteristics of distance learning has led some authors to assume that distance education feedback requires more clarity compared to classroom context feedback. Considering that distance learning does not offer as many opportunities for rich interaction between tutors and students, Price (1997) argues that learners and tutors in distance education need a crystal clear explanation of which assessment criteria are being used, when and how; absolute clarity is also necessary in the feedback that the tutor should offer (1997, p. 158). Moreover, Price observes that the tone of feedback comments and the choice of words are crucial for feedback effectiveness in distance education, since distance learners have limited opportunities to understand the tutor’s sense of humour and style of commenting, or other context-specific parameters (1997, p.159).

Another aspect of feedback that requires special care in the context of distance education is personalization. In the classroom context, tutors have frequent and profound opportunities to identify the strengths and the needs of each learner. This is not so in the context of distance education, where tutor-student interactions are less frequent. This means that personalization and context-sensitivity of feedback is more important in distance learning (see also Blake, 2009), and the need for processes that facilitate the identification of learners’ abilities is more urgent. Similarly, the setting of distance education restricts the opportunities for the development of a learning community. In view of this fact, feedback effectiveness in distance education requires more opportunities for interactions between students, more collaborative tasks and more frequent contact sessions between tutors and students (see also Tsagari, 2013).

In order to better address the conditions and needs of distance education, scholars have tried to identify methods of feedback provision that maximize feedback effectiveness while minimizing the negative aspects of distance learning. For instance, some authors have claimed that the use of synchronous communication (especially audio/video teleconferencing) is beneficial for feedback effectiveness because it allows the provision of timely feedback, it enhances students’ motivation and engagement in the learning process and it promotes interactions between and among students and tutors (see Branon & Essex, 2001; Tsagari, 2013; Watts, 2016). Asynchronous feedback, in the sense of text-based communication, can be beneficial, too, since it promotes learners’ autonomy, it allows for
deep engagement with feedback and learning content, and it is more flexible in terms of temporal and local restrictions (see Branon & Essex, 2001; Watts, 2016). Despite their advantages in enhancing feedback effectiveness, both methods present significant deficits, however. In particular, the use of asynchronous communication for feedback provision involves the risk of misunderstandings and misinterpretations, since it does not provide enough communicative cues to students (see Vonderwell, 2003). On the other hand, synchronous feedback is usually not structured enough, and, thus, it can consist of large amounts of information which are not relevant to feedback and learning content (see Watts, 2016).

When examining distance learning feedback, one should be mindful of the fact that, in the context of distance education, tutor feedback is usually the only communicative channel between instructors and learners (see, also, Tang & Harrison, 2011, p. 584). This means that, in tutor-student interactions – whatever form or content these might have – tutors must perform multiple roles (see, for instance, Stevenson et al., 1996; Price, 1997; Ice et al., 2007). Apart from providing comments, guidance, motivation and encouragement to learners, through distance education interactions and contact sessions, tutors must facilitate students’ learning, they must provide information and help on issues that go beyond the learning content (i.e. information about resources and communication tools available), and they have to promote the creation of a learning environment (see, for instance, Tsagari, 2013). In face-to-face teaching and learning, these needs might be addressed through other channels. In the context of distance education, they are inevitably taken care of through tutor-learner feedback interactions. Thus, feedback in distance education must do much more than providing feedback comments on assessed tasks. This does not mean that the principles of effective feedback in distance education are different to those applying in the classroom context. The point is that feedback processes in distance learning might target aims that lie beyond feedback provision, and, thus, any evaluation of distance education feedback should clearly distinguish between actions aiming at providing feedback and actions aiming at other educational issues.

3. Feedback on writing: Key ideas

Writing is a central activity in education of all levels. According to Dysthle (2007), writing is an important tool for thinking, learning, and knowledge creation. For Macdonald, effective writing involves learners’ understanding of the subject, but also learners’ development of independence and self-direction in learning (2001, pp. 179-180). In the context of second language learning, progress in writing skills is considered as evidence of language acquisition (Elola & Oskoz, 2016, p. 59). Despite its pedagogical significance, however, writing is somehow undermined in both teaching practices and scientific research. Guasch et al. note that academic writing, for instance, is not explicitly taught and university students in general do not receive adequate help in the writing process (2013, p. 324). In this context, it is not surprising that investigations of feedback on writing – let alone writing in a distance learning environment – are rather limited.

Although recent research suggests that the teaching and assessment of writing cannot be captured by binary classificatory dichotomies (see, for instance, Tai et al., 2015, p. 285), a great amount of previous studies approached feedback on writing through a distinction between feedback on form and feedback on content (for a discussion, see Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Feedback on content concerns corrections, comments and guidance on the ideas that students express in their writing, whilst feedback on form focuses more on the accuracy of
students’ writing, that is, students’ errors in syntax and grammar. In the literature, strategies of providing feedback on content are generally distinguished into corrective/verification feedback (feedback that provides correct answers to an assignment task) and elaborated feedback (feedback that regulates learning) (Guasch et al., 2013, p. 326). Alvarez et al. (2011) have proposed a more elaborate model, according to which feedback on writing falls into four categories, i.e. corrective feedback, epistemic feedback, suggestive feedback, and epistemic + suggestive feedback. In this approach, corrective feedback on content refers to comments that indicate the correct answer to an assignment, epistemic feedback refers to processes that require students to elaborate, clarify, and reflect critically on the content of their answers, suggestive feedback refers to the advice and guidance given to students on how to proceed and improve their ideas, and epistemic + suggestive feedback is a combination of strategies that trigger students’ critical thinking on the content of their writing while suggesting possible ideas for content improvement.

Studies have shown that learners appreciate and expect feedback on both the form and the content of their writing, and researchers have pointed out that feedback on both form and content is useful (Hyland, 2001; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Nevertheless, language instructors tend to overemphasize providing feedback on form, especially in the context of second language learning (see Hyland & Hyland, 2006). In general, feedback on form aims at improving the accuracy of learners’ writing and is usually performed through written corrective feedback. The effectiveness of corrective feedback is largely debated in the literature. Some scholars have claimed that error correction does not produce significant improvements and can be discouraging and harmful to students, whilst others consider that error correction contributes to second language development and can be effective when combined with classroom discussions (for a discussion, see Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Hartshorn et al., 2010). Arguing that written corrective feedback is crucial in the revision process for student writers, Tai et al. (2015) maintain that written corrective feedback serves an irreplaceable role as the medium between teachers and learners (2015, p. 285).

Beyond the form/content distinction, the literature reveals scholars’ concern on whether feedback on writing should have the form of explicit corrections (direct feedback) or should merely indicate errors to students with the use of codes and other symbols (indirect feedback). Discussing the issue, Hyland & Hyland (2006) note that indirect feedback is usually connected with long-term improvement, since it is considered to encourage students’ reflection and self-editing. On the other hand, direct feedback leads to immediate, more accurate and effective revisions of students’ drafts (see Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Elola & Oskoz point out that direct feedback produces accuracy gains in new pieces of writing while indirect feedback fosters long-term acquisition and greater writing accuracy, by engaging students in reflection on their existing knowledge (2016, p. 61).

Findings on the influence of direct and indirect feedback are rather inconclusive (see Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Elola & Oskoz, 2016). Indirect feedback can also produce accurate immediate revisions and long-term improvement is not straightforwardly guaranteed by students’ short-term ability to use indirect feedback (see also Ferris, 2006). In educational practice, instructors tend to use direct feedback for errors that they assume are untreatable by students; indirect feedback is preferred for errors perceived to be manageable by student writers themselves (see Ferris, 2006). Considering that indirect feedback is more difficult and can be confusing if error indications are not clear, the use of direct feedback seems more appropriate for low-level language learners, whilst indirect feedback appears to be more suitable to the needs and abilities of students with intermediate or higher language level (see Elola & Oskoz, 2016).
Aiming at exploiting the advantages of indirect feedback in the correction of students’ writing errors, Hartshorn et al. (2010) presented an alternative form of corrective feedback, which they labelled ‘dynamic corrective feedback’. Following other researchers (Howard, 1987; DeKeyser, 2001, 2007), Hartshorn et al. assume that students’ writing involves declarative knowledge (i.e. what one knows) and procedural knowledge (i.e. what one can do). Further, Hartshorn et al. argue that writing accuracy presupposes procedural knowledge which can only be attained through frequent and authentic practice. Frequent practice, though, is very demanding for both students and tutors, since it entails an extensive amount of time and effort for providing and using feedback. These limitations challenge the manageability and the consistency of feedback. In view of these considerations, the authors suggest the adoption of an assessment strategy which includes shorter and more frequent writing assignments. According to Hartshorn et al., shortening the length of students’ writing assignments can ensure high frequency of assessment tasks as well as high quality in the production and use of feedback. In order to make assessment and feedback processes meaningful to students, dynamic corrective feedback adopts an indirect method of indicating errors. More specifically, students are taught certain symbols which correspond to error types. Errors in students’ writing are only marked with these symbols, and students are expected to correct errors appropriately in subsequent drafts. Aiming at raising students’ awareness and self-monitoring, dynamic corrective feedback predicts that students should keep a record of their errors in an error list. Students are expected to consult their error list in order to monitor their progress and identify areas of persisting difficulty.

Scholars’ concern in designing feedback methods that enhance feedback usefulness, manageability and timeliness is also apparent in other feedback strategies proposed. In order to ensure that feedback is provided to students at a time when it can be useful and engaging, some authors have proposed the provision of feedback-on-drafts. As argued, using feedback comments and suggestions before the final submission of the assignment can help students improve their writing (see Handley & Williams, 2011, p. 97). Another proposed option is the provision of formative feedback in a process of iterative review of writing drafts (see Macdonald, 2001, p. 181). Some scholars consider that the usefulness and timeliness of feedback can be enhanced by the provision of exemplars (Handley & Williams, 2011; Bell et al., 2013). In the latter case, feedback on writing work of previous cohorts is shown to students in order to increase students’ familiarity with assessment marking criteria and feedback interpreting. According to the advocates of the use of exemplars, the development of students’ ability to interpret and understand feedback on assignments of a different context (i.e. on works of previous cohorts) can increase their ability to use criteria and feedback in the context of their own work (see Handley & Williams, p. 2011). Other suggested advantages of using exemplars in feedback on writing is the potential of engaging students in a more active role in their learning and the possibility of clarifying the writing style and language aimed at (Macdonald, 2001; Handley & Williams, 2011). An inherent deficit of this method, though, is that students tend to perceive exemplars as models, especially when exemplars are not critically discussed through tutor-student dialogue (see Handley & Williams, 2011).

The most prominent method of including students in the feedback process and turning them into active learners is peer feedback. Peer comments and responses on writing can be used either in a proper method of peer assessment and feedback provision or through collaborative writing (see Guasch et al., 2013). Hyland & Hyland note that effective peer responses constitute a key element in helping novice writers understand how readers see their work (2006, p. 90). Moreover, peer feedback is generally accepted as a factor contributing to students’ awareness of assessment criteria and self-judgment abilities (see,
for instance, Macdonald, 2001). Drawing on evidence that shows that peer feedback enhances learners' writing capabilities in all domains (cognitive, linguistic and social), Tai et al. argue that peer feedback is a significant supportive mechanism for the writing class (2015, p. 286). Despite its acknowledged significance, however, the usefulness and value of peer feedback is debatable. Research shows that students have a strong tendency to consider tutor feedback more reliable, probably due to some more general appreciation of the tutor’s authority (see Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Guasch et al., 2013). Similarly, it has been argued that peer feedback is not always sufficient or valid and that interpersonal relationships interfere with students’ expressed comments (see Tai et al., 2015). Several studies have questioned the ability of students to detect errors and provide useful feedback, pointing to the fact that only a small percentage of peer comments is actually included in students’ writing revisions (for a discussion, see Hyland & Hyland, 2006; see also present volume).

Apart from issues relating to the method and the giver of feedback, the literature reveals that the way in which feedback is communicated plays a significant role for its effectiveness. Several studies have tried to explore and compare the influence of oral and written feedback but their findings are rather inconclusive (see Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Research has shown that learners who successfully negotiate received feedback in oral conferences are more likely to achieve better and more extensive revisions (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 89). Similarly, investigations of students’ preferences have indicated that students prefer oral, face-to-face, feedback to electronic or computer-mediated written feedback (see Elola & Oskoz, 2016). It has to be noted, though, that students’ ability to negotiate feedback comments with teachers and actively engage in critical dialogues on feedback is tightly connected with sociocultural values and especially with students’ perceptions and beliefs about the tutor’s authority.

The style of comments provided seems to play an important role in feedback effectiveness, especially in the affective and emotional reception of feedback. Although some studies suggest that negative feedback on form might have a beneficial impact on second language development (Hartshorn et al., 2010, p. 86), in general, negative feedback and criticism may have a damaging effect on student writers’ confidence. Trying to avoid this risk, tutors often adopt mitigation strategies in their feedback. A very common strategy of this sort is to praise students frequently in order to build their confidence. However, as Hyland & Hyland observe, students expect constructive criticism on their work, and not platitudes (2006, p. 87). In order to avoid negative reactions from students, some tutors are more indirect in their criticism of students’ work. This strategy, however, involves the risk of making students miss the point of feedback or misinterpret feedback comments (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 87).

As the discussion so far shows, effective feedback on writing involves several parameters and can be achieved through a variety of methods and modes. The debate on the most appropriate feedback form or method is still on in numerous theoretical investigations. One of the few certainties that we can retain from previous approaches to feedback on writing is that effectiveness is highly context- and purpose-dependent. This point is more crucial in the case of distance education. Some of the methods described in this section, such as dynamic corrective feedback, are not easily transferable into the context of distance learning. Time and location restrictions applying in distance learning largely influence interaction and assignment frequency. Nevertheless, technology has provided several means of obviating these difficulties, retaining feedback quality. Audio and video teleconferencing, for instance, can facilitate interaction between and among students and peers (see Hyland, 2001). The
possibility for distance learners to use feedback provided at the place and time of their preference is an advantage of distance learning that tutors should fully exploit. In the next section, we will examine a number of empirical studies which investigated how feedback purposes can be better fulfilled through the use of particular communication methods and technological tools.

4. Findings of recent research on feedback

The growing interest in theoretical investigations of feedback is reflected in scholars’ increasing tendency to collect authentic empirical data on feedback-related phenomena. Recent empirical studies can be informally distinguished into three thematic areas, according to corresponding topics of interest: a) investigations on feedback beliefs, experiences and expectations, b) research on the implementation of specific feedback processes, and c) investigations on the influence of particular technological tools and interactional methods on feedback.

4.1. Feedback perceptions, experiences, and beliefs

Aiming at identifying feedback expectations of Iranian EFL learners and using a questionnaire they developed themselves, Alavi & Kaivanpanah (2007) collected data from a large sample of junior and senior high school Iranian students. According to their findings, Iranian students overwhelmingly prefer the teacher’s feedback over peer feedback. Students in the sample considered that the teacher’s feedback is generally more effective, accurate, precise, and reliable than feedback received from peers. Students also expressed significant concern on whether their peers have the linguistic ability required for providing effective feedback. Moreover, Alavi & Kaivanpanah’s study showed that students were doubtful on whether their peers can provide accurate feedback. An interesting finding of the study is the positive relation observed between student achievement and feedback expectations. Other variables that seemed to affect students’ expectations in Alavi & Kaivanpanah’s study were educational level and gender. Cultural factors did not have a significant impact on feedback expectancies, although the general tendency of Iranian students to be individualist and to disfavour cooperative learning is probably rooted in the educational tradition of Iran and in Iranian students’ previous experience.

Students’ perceptions of feedback were also studied by Lizzio & Wilson (2008). Using a mixed method consisting of questionnaires and anonymous written reports, the authors collected data on Australian university students’ beliefs and experiences of written feedback. Lizzio & Wilson’s findings suggest that university students approach feedback primarily as a tool for providing performance-gap information. Furthermore, students in the sample valued and expected developmental, encouraging and fair feedback. Interestingly, students were able to distinguish particular forms of encouragement (e.g. acknowledgment of correct responses, recognition of the effort spent) as well as feedback fairness factors (e.g. clarity). They held the view that the provision of effective feedback is an indication of the tutor’s engagement with and interest in the work assessed. Supporting Alavi & Kaivanpanah’s (2007) findings, Lizzio & Wilson’s investigation did not reveal any significant correlation between cultural factors and feedback perceptions. On the other hand, unlike Alavi & Kaivanpanah, Lizio & Wilson’s findings did not show any influence of academic achievement on students’ feedback beliefs.
Australian university students’ perceptions on feedback were further examined by Dowden et al. (2013). Drawing on questionnaire-collected data, Dowden et al.’s analysis revealed that university students, both distance and on-campus, have an emotional response to feedback and that students’ emotional reactions significantly influence their perception of feedback. Some students expressed the view that tutors are not sensitive enough and do not acknowledge the challenges involved in the transition to tertiary studies, while others expressed frustration over cryptic and idiosyncratic marking or marking which is not supported by explanatory comments. In general, students also had a negative emotional response towards marking that does not focus on academic content but on text-production skills, such as writing technique and punctuation. These findings suggest that there is a substantial gap between teachers’ intentions in providing feedback and students’ perceptions in receiving it. Another theme that emerged from Dowden et al.’s study is that students prefer to receive feedback from their tutors rather than from casual markers. Unlike findings from other similar investigations (see Dzakiria, 2008; Price et al., 2010), Dowden et al. found that the overwhelming majority in their sample (i.e. 82%) were satisfied with the quality of written feedback they had received.

Strong emotional responses were also observed in Hargreaves’ (2013) study on UK primary school students’ perceptions and experience of feedback. Students in Hargreaves’ study felt angry and upset that the teacher did not give them enough individualized feedback (2013, p. 241). Moreover, students expressed frustration towards overly directive teacher feedback and reacted negatively towards unnecessarily burdensome feedback. On the other hand, they appreciated and welcomed substantial feedback, i.e. feedback that gives them enough cues, but, also, enough time and autonomy to reach correct answers on their own.

Expectations, experiences and beliefs about feedback have also been examined from tutors/teachers’ perspective. Investigating the perceptions of 50 tutors supporting an online university English course, Tang & Harrison (2011) found that tutors’ beliefs about feedback exhibit considerable diversity. For instance, while some tutors believed that feedback is useful only to some students, particularly the weak or those who have failed some test, others maintained that good work also needs feedback. Similarly, while some tutors expressed the view that the purpose of feedback is to correct mistakes in students’ work, others believed that feedback should also identify strengths in students’ work, so that students can build on their achievements and make greater progress. The same diversity was observed in tutors’ beliefs on students’ use of feedback. Though all tutors were uncertain about how well students use feedback, some argued that the only feedback students care about is their scores, whilst others claimed that students do care and make use of the feedback provided. Despite the differences, though, all tutors acknowledged the fact that training in marking assignments is necessary.

Chetwynd & Dobbyn (2011) examined tutors’ attitudes towards providing feedback in distance learning higher education. Drawing on evidence from 70 tutors of Open University UK, Chetwynd & Dobbyn compared tutors’ beliefs to the centrally produced marking guides that form the feedback framework of Open University. The study showed that there was a clear clash between tutors’ intentions in relation to their feedback and the reality of the support provided by the marking guides. While tutors’ emphasis was on future learning and not on current performance, the University marking guides were only useful as a short-term tool for retrospective assessment of the assignments in hand. Tutors in the study perceived that centrally produced marking guides offered no help for future-altering feedback and feedback in the pre-assignment study stage. Moreover, Chetwynd & Dobbyn’s analysis of
the University’s marking guides revealed that the centrally produced framework offered no help to tutors on how to contextualize, personalize and present their feedback.

Valuable information on tutors’ and teachers’ beliefs on feedback has been also provided by comparative studies. Hyland (2001), for instance, compared tutors’ and students’ perspectives on the feedback offered in a distance language course in Hong Kong. Her method included data gathered from questionnaires, interviews and analysis of data collected from the feedback offered by tutors. Hyland found that almost half of the feedback provided was on content and less than 17% focused on the process of learning. In the study, each tutor used a different pattern of feedback, although they had all received similar training on marking. Students were generally positive about the helpfulness of the feedback they had received. They found feedback comments on text organization and structure very useful, while they also appreciated comments on content and ideas. On the other hand, comments on spelling, punctuation, and academic conventions were perceived as less useful. Concerning language errors, the majority of students preferred to receive feedback in the form of comments that summarize and explain major language problems. A significant proportion sought complete corrections of all language mistakes, while an equal amount of students wanted tutors to simply highlight problematic areas, leaving for students the responsibility of correcting errors. An interesting finding in Hyland’s research concerns the strategies that students adopt in dealing with problematic feedback. The study showed that, in case of misunderstandings or inability to apply the feedback offered, students tended to rely on their own resources, being reluctant to contact the tutor for further help. In general, students considered that tutors are facilitators of learning who also have an important role as correctors of students’ work. From their perspective, tutors in the study considered that feedback serves an important function in distance learning, especially in encouraging and supporting students, but they were unsure as to whether their feedback was useful to students or even used at all. Moreover, tutors had different views on what kind of feedback is most useful to students. According to Hyland, her findings reveal the individual nature of both students’ and tutors’ expectations on feedback and feedback practices (2001, p. 245).

More recently, Price et al. (2010) investigated perspectives on feedback, in a study that focused on the academic context of UK universities. Drawing on data from observation case studies, interviews and questionnaires, Price et al. examined student and staff perceptions on feedback in three partner business schools. Students in the study perceived that they were given vague, ambiguous and even illegible feedback. Moreover, students expressed the view that their tutors provided feedback which was less directive than what they were used to at school and they tended to believe that this perceived difference was indicative of tutors’ lack of care. They considered that difficulties in interpreting feedback should be addressed with dialogue and interaction with the tutor and suggested discussion of exemplars as a desirable strategy for solving feedback problems. Concerning students’ preferences, the study showed that students appreciated feedback that can be used immediately, as they felt that it is more engaging and motivating. From their perspective, staff in the Price et al. sample acknowledged that feedback is important for students’ longitudinal learning and development but had no clear idea as to whether students understand it. Moreover, staff could not identify the benefits students gained through the feedback offered. Interestingly, they argued that there was no mechanism requiring students to show how the feedback provided was used. Price et al. found diverse views on feedback purposes between students and staff as well as among each of the two groups. More specifically, while some members of the staff perceived that feedback’s purpose is to contribute to students’ learning, others considered feedback as a justification of the mark given. On the other hand, students distinguished clearly between mark and feedback but
they seemed to approach feedback as a short-term tool that should have immediate application in the next assignment. Despite the extended diversity in their views, however, both students and staff recognized the importance of dialogue and interaction for effective feedback practices.

Students’ and teachers’ perceptions of feedback in the largely unexplored context of Nigeria were presented by Omoroguwa (2012). Drawing on questionnaire collected data, Omoroguwa investigated perceived benefits and challenges in feedback in a distance learning institution in Nigeria. The study showed that Nigerian students considered that feedback is beneficial mostly in giving opportunities for interaction with peers, opportunities to discuss difficult concepts, as well as opportunities to ask why a question was marked wrong. Difficulties in interpreting feedback, anxiety about open scrutiny, and the time-consuming nature of the process were the challenges that Nigerian students mentioned most. From their point of view, Nigerian tutors acknowledged most the opportunities that feedback gave them to learn about students’ concepts, to understand students’ learning progress, and to establish better communication with students. Maintaining objectivity in scoring, time considerations, and poor presentation of concerns by students were the greatest challenges that Nigerian tutors indicated in Omoroguwa’s study.

4.2. Research on the implementation of particular feedback methods

Apart from studies on perceptions and beliefs, a large amount of recent literature on feedback consists of investigations that tried to explore the impact of particular feedback methods and the perceived experience of these methods among learners and teachers. Handley & Williams (2011), for instance, explored how students’ learning can be enhanced by the use of exemplars posted onto the university’s virtual online environment. Using anonymous questionnaires, informal discussions, and usage statistics (i.e. the number of “hits” counted on the university’s databank), the authors investigated the interaction of undergraduate students with database exemplars, and the effect of this use on students’ understanding of assessment requirements. Handley & Williams found that students made significant use of the posted exemplars and found the databank provided very useful. Almost half of the students considered that seeing the structure and layout of exemplar analysis was beneficial to them. Nevertheless, the analysis showed that no student posted comments or asked questions about the exemplars provided and students’ marks did not significantly change after these exemplars were introduced. According to Handley & Wilson, this rather disappointing finding is due to deficits in the implementation strategy used, and should not be interpreted as an indication that exemplars are not beneficial to students.

The use of exemplars has also been examined by Bell et al. (2013). Bell et al. examined the perceptions of first year accounting students on grade descriptors and annotated exemplars. Although the study did not examine the impact of grade descriptors and exemplars on students’ actual performance, Bell et al.’s investigation largely supported Handley & Williams’ findings. More specifically, students in Bell et al.’s research showed high engagement with the resources provided and the majority of them found descriptors and annotations very useful in completing the assessment task. Students expressed the view that the resources provided helped them understand what was required of them in a challenging and unfamiliar task. The authors found two main themes in students’ responses: a) students who were requiring guidance in completing the task, and b) students that were happy with an idea of standards. Students of the former category used exemplars and grade descriptors as a recipe for the task in hand and required more examples in general and more examples
for each grade descriptor. Students of the latter category used exemplars and descriptors as a framework and were more likely to find the resources restrictive (2013, p. 774).

Barker & Pinard (2014) investigated the implementation of iterative feedback on postgraduate students of biological sciences in Aberdeen, UK. The focus of the research was students’ perceptions of iterative feedback and the impact of the process on students’ achievements. Barker & Pinard found that students valued iterative feedback highly, particularly because it could be used in a progressive way, and because it gave students the opportunity to use tutors’ comments for improving future work. Moreover, students appreciated the reassurance that they felt receiving iterative feedback. Applying a thematic analysis of the feedback offered, the authors found that tutors’ comments varied remarkably. Brief comments or comments that could not apply immediately were not valued by students. Similarly, students did not seem to engage with negative or dismissive comments. In what concerns students achievements, Barker & Pinard’s study revealed that students can achieve significantly higher marks when they are encouraged or motivated to respond to their feedback.

Focusing on cognitive diagnostic assessment and diagnostic feedback, Jang et al. (2015) investigated how perceived abilities and goal orientation influence the ways in which students process diagnostic feedback, both in terms of feedback interpretation and in terms of feedback use. Investigating the educational context of Canada, and the case of 11-12 year old students, Jang et al. revealed that students’ profiles mediate both the interpretation and the use of diagnostic feedback. More specifically, Jang et al. found that students’ perceptions of their abilities were either inflated or deflated. Students with a mastery orientation showed incremental beliefs, while students with a performance orientation had the fixed belief of intelligence. Mastery-oriented students were more likely to disagree with their diagnostic feedback report, thus showing a critical engagement with the content of the feedback. A very interesting finding of the study was that the greater influence on students’ achievements was not students’ goals, but their perceptions of their parents’ goal orientation.

In the educational context of Taiwan, Yu & Wu (2016) examined the contribution of online peer feedback with respect to students’ question generation. The methodological design used included three student groups, one group in which students functioned as assessors, one group in which they functioned as assessed, and one group in which they had both roles. Yu & Wu found that students benefited by playing both the roles of assessor and assessed. In the group of assessors, those students who provided better peer feedback produced better quality questions. Of the assessed, those who received better feedback also produced better quality questions. Students who had both roles produced better quality questions than those who had a single role. Despite the increased demands of the task, students in the Yu & Wu study did not present any cognitive overload.

Apart from studies on the implementation of feedback in general, recent literature exhibits an increased interest of scholars in investigating the impact of feedback on learners’ writing. In their study, Hartshorn et al. (2010) investigated the influence of dynamic corrective feedback on students’ writing accuracy. Responding to criticism on corrective feedback, Hartshorn et al. proposed what they called dynamic corrective feedback (see section 3 above) and investigated the effectiveness of their model in an experimental condition which included two groups of students, one who received dynamic corrective feedback and one who functioned as a control group. The research revealed that students who received dynamic corrective feedback produced significantly higher accuracy scores compared to
students who had been taught with the traditional approach. On the other hand, students instructed with the traditional approach performed better in writing fluency and complexity. Hartshorn et al.’s findings revealed that dynamic corrective feedback can be highly beneficial for writing accuracy but it does not contribute to students’ development in writing fluency and complexity.

Guasch et al. (2013) conducted a study in order to identify what type of feedback best improves students’ collaborative writing in an online learning environment based on asynchronous communication. The study used data from psychology bachelor degree students of Open University Catalonia. Guasch et al.’s findings showed that collaborative writing among students who received epistemic feedback improved more than the writing of students who received either corrective or suggestive feedback. No significant differences in improvement were found between students who received corrective feedback and those who received suggestive feedback. In what concerns the giver of the feedback, Guasch et al.’s research revealed that tutor epistemic feedback improved students’ collaborative writing best. Tutor epistemic feedback seemed to better promote collaboration among students because it required of them to make and justify decisions together, and to form collaborative plans of further action.

Focusing on the educational context of Taiwan, Tai et al. (2015) explored the effects of peer review and the teacher’s corrective feedback on the writing of low proficiency EFL learners. The study showed that students were generally positive towards their experience of peer review feedback and perceived that their peers could identify errors in their writing. Moreover, the students felt that serving as both learners and reviewers contributed to their learning. Nevertheless, students expressed their concern about vague and confusing peer feedback and did not appreciate peer feedback comments that emphasized superficial linguistic form. Considering that the tutor has more authority and is more qualified and competent than their peers, students in Tai et al.’s study preferred tutor to peer feedback. In general, Tai et al.’s findings showed that students benefited from the combination of peer and tutor feedback, mainly because this combination created opportunities to engage in interaction and deeper reflection. The use of peer feedback seemed to have increased students’ self-awareness, as well as their familiarity with assessment criteria. Apart from the aforementioned benefits, however, the study also revealed serious challenges in implementing effective peer feedback. In particular, low proficiency in English had a negative impact on students’ ability to function as facilitators.

Elola & Oskoz (2016) examined the use of specific technological tools in the provision of feedback on writing. Drawing on a questionnaire and interviews with Spanish learners enrolled in a Spanish advanced writing course, Elola & Oskoz compared feedback uses of text-based computer software (Microsoft Word) and oral feedback based on screen cast software. The authors found evidence that oral feedback was commonly used for commenting in the areas of content, structure, and organization. Written feedback was more frequently used for comments on form. Feedback on the content and structure was more frequent, more elaborate and included lengthier comments. These findings seem to suggest some relation between the software used and feedback form or some manipulation of the feedback according to the limitations set by the medium used. With respect to learners’ performance, Elola & Oskoz’s study showed that learners revised similarly, regardless of the tool used. Students expressed the view that oral feedback based on screenshot software offered some of the features of actual conversation and made them feel like engaging in an actual dialogue with the instructor. However, they found both
feedback methods useful and suggested that their ideal type of feedback would combine both oral and text-based communication tools.

4.3. Research on the influence of interactional methods and technological tools on feedback

Focusing on the context of distance education, several authors have conducted empirical investigations on the influence of particular interactional methods and technological tools on feedback. For instance, Vonderwell (2003) explored postgraduate students’ perceptions on and experiences of asynchronous communication in online learning. Drawing on data collected from informal interviews with students, student-teacher mails and transcripts of discussions on the University’s blackboard, Vonderwell revealed students’ perception that asynchronous communication is not personal enough. Students in the Vonderwell research complained about the lack of a one-on-one relationship with the instructor and about the low level of communication with their classmates and teammates. Students expressed the need for consistent and timely feedback and perceived that the feedback they received was generally delayed. Moreover, they felt that online communication requires clear and carefully constructed messages. On the other hand, asynchronous communication was perceived as beneficial in some respects, especially in that it provided students with enough time to carefully form and express their ideas. Another perceived advantage of asynchronous online communication was the “anonymity” that it offered, which made students less hesitant in asking questions.

Park & Bonk (2007) explored the benefits and challenges of a mixed system of synchronous communication in distance learning, as perceived by postgraduate students of a Midwestern university. The communication system that Park & Bonk explored consisted of a web-based collaboration system (Breeze) and an audio-conferencing tool. The authors found that students appreciated synchronous communication, because it gave them the opportunity of prompt feedback. Students felt that timely feedback had a reassuring function in their progress and it also offered them significant encouragement and motivation for keeping up on their work. The provision of peer feedback was also highly valued. Students considered that synchronous interactions with their peers offered a variety of useful new perspectives and ideas on their projects. The use of multiple channels for communication was generally perceived as beneficial by students, who felt that seeing, hearing and communicating was better than merely reading text on the screen. Park & Bonk also found that the use of a text-based system together with a conferencing tool contributed to decreasing cases of miscommunication and eliminated the sense of isolation that students experienced in the first weeks of the course. Beyond perceived benefits, the Park & Bonk study revealed several challenges and disadvantages that students perceived in synchronous feedback. More specifically, students found that synchronous feedback restricted reflection time and caused trouble in scheduling their activities. Internet connection problems and audio-related issues were also mentioned as challenges. In addition, for those not speaking English as a native language, synchronous communication seemed to worsen language barriers.

Experiences of feedback in distance learning in the Malaysian educational context were investigated by Dzakiria (2008). Dzakiria found that university students in her study experienced difficulties in becoming distance learners. Diversity in age, educational background and working experience made this transition more challenging. Students in Dzakiria’s research felt isolated and inadequate with regard to technological skills. Moreover, they were dependent on the tutors and concerned about not getting immediate
response to their questions. Although they valued timely feedback, they were generally not satisfied with the feedback they had received.

The importance of interaction and communication in distance learning was also highlighted in Tsagari’s work (2013). Tsagari investigated the ways in which a group of Greek EFL learners enrolled on a distance learning programme experienced the effectiveness of their contact sessions. The study drew on data from learners’ reflective journals, a method which allowed for a dynamic and in-depth analysis of learners’ experiences, feelings, and reactions. Tsagari found evidence that contact sessions contributed to students’ learning, providing support of three kinds: cognitive, affective, and systematic. Concerning cognitive support, learners in Tsagari’s sample felt that the feedback that they received from the tutor during contact sessions helped them in understanding the strengths and weaknesses of their work, as well as in planning future actions. Moreover, the use of high-quality materials, such as mini-quizzes, advanced learners’ independence and self-sufficiency. Overall, the feedback provided in contact sessions was perceived as helpful for the writing of course assignments. On the affective level, contact sessions offered opportunities of growing relationships among members of the group. Contact sessions were also perceived as promoting collaboration and exchange of ideas among members of the group, which contributed to psychological and motivational support. On the level of systematic support, students in Tsagari’s sample stated that contact sessions helped them in their time management as well as in identifying Information Technology (IT) strategies and sources that they could use in their study.

Investigating particular feedback tools, Ice et al. (2007) conducted a case study in which asynchronous text-based feedback was replaced by asynchronous audio feedback. Using data from an end of course survey, post course interviews, and learners’ final project, the authors explored master’s and doctoral level students’ beliefs and experience of asynchronous audio feedback. Ice et al. found that the majority of students preferred audio to text feedback and considered that audio feedback contributed to a better understanding of the tutor’s comments, while creating a less formal learning environment. Moreover, audio feedback increased students’ feeling of participation in a group, lessened social distance and gave students the impression that the instructor was caring. On the level of effectiveness, Ice et al. found that audio feedback increased the possibility of students applying higher order thinking and problem-solving skills. Audio feedback was also beneficial to tutors, who could reduce the time required for providing feedback by approximately 75%.

Students’ requirement for timely feedback and tutors’ burden of consuming considerable amounts of time for providing feedback motivated Bayerlein (2014), who explored the effectiveness of automatically generated feedback as an alternative for its manually generated counterpart. Bayerlein examined the reactions of both on-campus and off-campus students (both undergraduate and postgraduate) to automatically generated feedback and their perceptions with regard to timely and extremely timely feedback. Her findings suggest that, except on-campus undergraduates, students in general do not perceive any difference between timely and extremely timely feedback. Similarly, among all students in the sample, only off-campus postgraduates found automatically generated feedback more constructive.

5. Pedagogical implications

The characteristics of effective feedback seem to be well established in the literature. Scholars generally agree that our pedagogical interventions should aim towards timely,
motivational, personalized, manageable and criteria-related feedback. These principles are neither challenged nor modified by recent investigations. Nevertheless, recent research contributed some important pedagogical lessons, by scrutinizing, clarifying, and elaborating on the theoretical principles of effective feedback in the context of pedagogical reality.

Probably the most important pedagogical implication of recent research is the identification of balance as the key factor in effective feedback practices. To take an example, authors unanimously argue that feedback should be timely. They do not specify, however, how prompt feedback should be. Recent research showed that extremely timely feedback and immediate responses to students are not helpful to students’ performance and learning (see, for instance, Howard, 1987; Hargreaves, 2013; Bayerlein, 2014). Feedback should be provided in a timely and constant manner but it should also leave enough time for students to work out their own solutions and answers. Recent studies revealed that feedback should be timely enough to be useful, care-indicative and re-assuring but it should also be delayed enough to ensure that students have been given the time and autonomy to engage with the learning content and increase their abilities of self-awareness and self-monitoring (see also Howard, 1987; Hargreaves, 2013).

Balance is the key to the quantity issue, too. Feedback is effective when it provides the amount of correction and information that students really need. Any amount of information that goes beyond this point is threatening to students’ autonomy and development, is not appreciated by students and it adds a useless informative burden to assessment and learning (Hargreaves, 2013). In the case of error correction, for instance, recent research pointed out that students prefer to correct highlighted errors on their own, instead of having all their errors corrected by the tutor (see Hyland, 2001). Research findings suggest that this method is more engaging for the students, it develops their familiarity with the assessment criteria, and it has a positive impact on their learning and achievements (see Hartshorn et al., 2010). Similarly, in providing feedback, instructors should be mindful of keeping the balance between the amount of information that concerns the assignment in hand and the amount of information that aims at future learning and development (see Lizzio & Wilson, 2008). As concerns feedback comments, tutors must use the appropriate proportion of praise and criticism in order to protect students’ confidence while providing constructive feedback (see Lizzio & Wilson, 2008, p. 264).

Another area that needs careful calculation concerns the relation between assessment criteria and feedback provision. Research has shown that students need clarity in the criteria on which they are assessed (see, for instance, Lizzio & Wilson, 2008; Hatziapostolou & Paraskakis, 2010; Handle & Williams, 2011). Good and critical understanding of assessment standards and task requirements are essential for the effectiveness of students’ performance and learning (Bell et al., 2013). Similarly, grades should be clear and intelligible to students. On the other hand, effective feedback necessitates a certain degree of flexibility, in that it has to be contextualized and individualized so that it can meet every student’s needs. In feedback, what works for one student might not work for some other (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 88). Jang et al. (2015) revealed that perceived abilities, goal orientation and even perceptions of parents’ goals influence students’ interpretation and use of feedback. These are factors that instructors should identify in forming and delivering their feedback. Creating opportunities for meaningful interactions and dialogue between students and the instructor might suggest a useful diagnostic tool for identifying students’ personal needs, expectations, and beliefs.

Interaction and dialogue could also help in building warm relations with and among
students. Creating a warm atmosphere between participants in assessment and feedback will be beneficial on many levels. More specifically, empirical evidence shows that students often have emotional negative reactions to feedback (Hargreaves, 2013; Dowden et al., 2013) and sometimes believe that tutors do not care about them or their work (Price et al. 2010). Dialogue and interaction could contribute to the tutor-students relation and could weaken students’ perception that the tutor is not caring or has no respect for their personalities (see also Dowden et al., 2013). The provision of timely and helpful feedback can also deliver a message to students, i.e. that the tutor really cares about their development and personalities. Research also revealed that some students are hesitant in asking questions when found in contexts in which they are not “anonymous” (see Vonderwell, 2003). This tendency seems to indicate that certain students are somehow frightened to express their pedagogical needs in front of their teammates/classmates. Opportunities for interaction and collaborative activities could enhance students’ feeling of belonging to a team of learners with similar needs. This sense of belonging to a community would arguably make students more confident and less hesitant in asking for feedback and guidance.

A very important and productive area of recent research focused on investigating who is, and who is perceived as the most effective feedback giver. Research shows that learners in general value forms of peer feedback and self-assessment but prefer receiving tutor feedback (see Alavi & Kaivanpanah, 2007; Dowden et al., 2013; Tai et al., 2015). Several studies support this tendency, especially in the context of second language learning, where tutor feedback appears to be more effective and useful to learners (see Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Certainly, tutors play a crucial role in feedback provision. The problem is that students tend to justify their preference for tutor feedback on the basis of conservative views about the tutor’s authority and biased beliefs on peers’ abilities (see, for instance, Alavi & Kaivanpanah, 2007; Guasch et al., 2013). Despite students’ biases, peer feedback can be equally valuable to tutor feedback. Moreover, certain pedagogical purposes are much better promoted through peer assessment and feedback processes. For instance, Alavi & Kaivanpanah note that, in language learning, peer feedback can be more powerful than teacher feedback, because its concern is with topics of interest and relevance to the learners. Research has shown that peer feedback is very effective in developing students’ familiarity with assessment criteria and in engaging students with concepts presented in the class (Odo, 2015; Yu & Wu, 2016). The exchange of different ideas and perspectives on learning content and assignments is another beneficial factor of learning which is best served by peer feedback (Park & Bonk, 2007). Further, peer feedback is crucial for engaging students in meaningful interactions, and also for strengthening the feeling of belonging in a team. Especially in the context of distance education, where opportunities for interaction are limited, peer feedback can have a crucial contribution in maintaining learners’ motivation and engagement with the course, as well as in eliminating their sense of isolation.

In view of the aforementioned advantages, pedagogical efforts should concentrate on promoting and enhancing peer feedback. Tutors and institutions should focus on eliminating biases towards peers’ ability to provide feedback, by including peer feedback in their standard assessment and feedback practices. Moreover, tutors and institutions should take action towards ensuring the quality of peer feedback. The provision of training, guidance, and resources (written and computer-based) on peer feedback could contribute to improving the effectiveness of the peer feedback offered, but it would also help in raising students’ appreciation of peer feedback (see Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Attention should be paid to using peer feedback only in contexts and tasks in which learners can fully perform
their role as feedback providers. Research has shown that linguistic barriers might impede students – especially those of low language proficiency - performing their role as feedback givers (see, for instance, Tai et al., 2015). To avoid problems of this sort, tutors should create and select peer feedback opportunities that suit students’ abilities.

As discussed in section 2, previous research has not identified some particular feedback method as most helpful or most effective. Although in certain contexts and tasks some feedback practices seem more fruitful than others, all methods have advantages and disadvantages. Thus, it would be better to consider that feedback practices and methods form complementary tools for effective pedagogy, rather than competitive approaches to assessing and learning. Depending on the pedagogical purpose and the context (e.g. educational level, nature of the course, distance vs face-to-face learning), tutors should choose the appropriate feedback method for the task in hand.

For instance, iterative feedback has been proven to be helpful and effective for writing, since it engages students by giving them the opportunity to use guidance provided immediately (see Barker & Pinard, 2014). Considering these benefits, writing courses – especially in the distance learning context and particularly in the text production phase – could be more effective, if they included some form of iterative feedback. Similarly, exemplars and grade descriptors could be adopted as feedback methods, when the pedagogical aim is the development of students’ familiarity with assessment criteria and the maximization of students’ understanding of the intended goals (see Handley & Williams, 2011; Bell et al., 2013). Of course, tutors should be careful in choosing exemplars, since students often misunderstand exemplar paradigms and interpret them as models that they should imitate. Thus, it would be better for tutors to use constructed exemplars that illustrate clearly the point that students should get. Discussion of exemplars with students could further help towards enhancing the clarifying force of the method (Handley & Williams, 2011). The inclusion of self-assessment practices, portfolios and error lists would also be helpful, especially for developing students’ abilities in self-learning and in monitoring their own progress (see Lam, 2014). Finally, considering that detailed and useful feedback requires significant amounts of effort and time on both tutors’ and students’ part, the adoption of practices which shorten the length of assessment tasks in order to maintain the quality and length of feedback would be highly beneficial for feedback usefulness and practicality (see Hartshorn et al., 2010).

Beyond particular feedback types and strategies, scholars have also explored the impact of communicative methods and tools on feedback. For instance, recent research scrutinized the influence of asynchronous and synchronous communication on feedback processes (see, for instance, Branon & Essex, 2001; Dikli, 2003; Watts, 2016). These studies revealed that synchronous communication promotes students’ engagement and motivation as well as students’ sense of belonging in a team. These effects are highly beneficial, especially in the context of distance learning, where students’ drop-out rates are high and learners often experience isolation and lack of motivation (see, for instance Ypsilandis, 2002; Tsagari, 2013). Another benefit of synchronous feedback, and particularly video/audio conferencing, is that it provides multiple communicative cues (such as gestures, tone of voice, facial expressions) which diminish the possibility of misinterpretation. These advantages make synchronous communication feedback indispensable for distance learning, especially for constructs requiring clear and extensive feedback comments, such as writing.

Certainly, synchronous communication raises a number of challenges, predominantly in what concerns the quality of the technological tools used and the ability of learners to
participate in synchronous communications. Most previous studies have shown that technological tools used for audio and video synchronous communication often present sound and vision problems which impede effective interaction. Research revealed that some distance learners (and some tutors as well) are not competent enough to use technological tools of synchronous communication (see Dikli, 2003; Watts, 2016). Moreover, synchronous communication seems to worsen language barriers for learners of lower language proficiency. The aforementioned disadvantages indicate that the use of synchronous communication should be well designed. Institutions and tutors must provide appropriate training in technological tools for both tutors and students (see Blake, 2009; Watts, 2016). The provision of some institutional support service in technology and communication would also be valuable. Technological tools should be chosen carefully in order to fit students’ abilities (technological and linguistic) and the pedagogical purpose at issue.

Feedback practices can also benefit from the use of asynchronous communication. Research shows that learners appreciate asynchronous communication feedback because it gives them enough time to reflect on the learning content and carefully express their ideas (see Branon & Essex, 2001; Watts, 2016). Considering research findings, asynchronous communication can be very effective in cases in which feedback’s aim is to trigger learners’ profound reflection and deep engagement. Another advantage of using asynchronous communication for feedback provision is that it does not impose any time and place restrictions on students. This “freedom” aspect can be crucial for feedback provision, especially in cases where distance learners are located in different time zones or when learners have professional and other non-academic time restrictions. Of course, the provision of feedback through asynchronous communication always involves the disadvantage of not creating chances for interaction and personal communication between students and tutors. Thus, tutors should avoid using only asynchronous communication for providing comments and guidance, especially in the context of distance education, where feedback is often the only channel of interaction between learners and instructors. The inclusion of audio and video material in asynchronous feedback seems to enhance asynchronous feedback effectiveness, since it increases students’ feeling of belonging in a learning community, it decreases the possibilities of misinterpretation, while reducing the time needed for providing quality comments (Ice et al. 2007). In general, the appropriate and carefully designed combination of synchronous and asynchronous communication seems to be the most effective form of feedback provision. As research shows, a combination of this sort is also preferred by students (see Elola & Oskoz, 2016).

Regardless of the communication method and the technological tools available, tutors should be aware that the pedagogical purpose and the needs of the particular educational context in which they perform determines the choice of instruments, not the other way round. Tutors should identify their teaching and assessing aims and then calculate how these aims could be better promoted by the communicative means available (see Howard, 1987). Similarly, tutors must design and provide feedback, bearing in mind that their contribution is valuable only if it is used by students (see Sadler, 1989). Communication methods, technological tools and feedback strategies should enhance feedback usefulness and actual use. The adoption of practices that ensure that students incorporate in their work the feedback they are given would greatly contribute to promoting the actual use of feedback. For instance, tutors could ask students to submit assignments together with some written description of how the work in hand addresses previous feedback comments. Encouraging or requiring students to respond to feedback (either in oral discussions or in written reports) might also promote students’ engagement with and negotiation of feedback.
Above all, recent research has made it clear that there is an urgent need for training and assessment literacy development for both instructors and learners (see also Price et al., 2010). Students’ emotional, negative responses to feedback, as well as some tutors’ expressed views on their role as feedback-givers suggest the existence of major misconceptions about assessment and feedback (see, for instance, Price et al., 2010; Tang & Harrison, 2011). The promotion of assessment literacy (Vogt & Tsagari, 2014) could help both tutors and learners understand what is assessed in the assessment process and for what purpose. The development of assessment literacy (http://taleproject.eu) would clarify the educational aim of feedback to all parts involved. The illumination of these issues can contribute to raising the quality of feedback provided and promoting the effective use of feedback comments.

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Unravelling the complexities of tutors’ feedback in distance education

Χαρακτηριστικά της ανατροφοδότησης του καθηγητή-συμβούλου στην εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση

Evangelia KARAGIANNI

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.

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 έργασία αναφέρεται στα αποτελέσματα μιας μελέτης η οποία εστιάζει στην ανατροφοδότηση που παρείχαν τέσσερις διδάσκοντες της τους εργασίες της Εθνικής Αναπτυξιακής Διπλωματίας Μεταπτυχιακής Εκπαίδευσης (ΜΔΕ) της διδασκαλίας της Αγγλικής ως ξένης/διεθνούς γλώσσας στο Ελληνικό Ανοικτό Πανεπιστήμιο (ΕΛΠ) σε εργασίες
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

**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 knowledgeable 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, Touvaltzis & 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’ comments\(^1\) 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.

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\(^1\) 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Assignment grade</th>
<th>Number of words (main text only)</th>
<th>Number of tutor’s comments</th>
<th>Students’ number of words/number of tutor’s comments ratio</th>
<th>Number of words in comments</th>
<th>Average number of words per comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2427</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>1483</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>1812</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>201.3</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2170</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>38.75</td>
<td>455</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>2661</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>33.68</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 comments\(^2\) 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.
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 nonexistent:

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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus on product</th>
<th>Focus on process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASSIGNMENT 1</td>
<td>27,1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASSIGNMENT 2</td>
<td>27,3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASSIGNMENT 3</td>
<td>20,0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASSIGNMENT 4</td>
<td>31,5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AVERAGE</td>
<td>26,3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 feedback⁴ (see Figure 4), we can see that no similarities can be spotted, which supports the view that

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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.

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):
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 Touvatizis & 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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She also participated in the compilation of the new Foreign Languages Curriculum for the Ministry of Education. She has published papers in peer-reviewed journals and presented her work in numerous conferences. Her current professional interests lie in teaching young learners, the use of ICT in FL learning/ teaching, teacher training and Teacher Development.
A pilot study on conditions under which assessment of and feedback on written assignments affect learning

Μια πιλοτική έρευνα των προϋποθέσεων υπό τις οποίες η αξιολόγηση και η ανατροφοδότηση των γραπτών εργασιών επηρεάζουν τη μάθηση

Ifigenia KOFOU

Assessment plays a crucial role in Distance Education, as it helps tutors perform better, design strategies, set priorities and monitor students’ progress through written assignments and the feedback tutors send their students. Frequent assignments constitute the cornerstone of Distance Education and establish a dialogue between students and tutors, when tutors guide the students to do research, produce quality work and become autonomous by improving their learning strategies and writing skills through constructive comments. Feedback has gained ground in Distance Education because of its influence on learning and progress, as it is related to students’ expectations with regard to explanations, justifications, reflection, critical thinking, motivation and suggestions for improvement. The present pilot study, conducted at the Postgraduate Programme of Teaching English as a Foreign/International Language of the Hellenic Open University (HOU) during the academic year 2015-2016, is trying to shed light on the unexplored impact of assessment and feedback on students’ learning, skills development and metacognition. The study is based on a ‘set of conditions’ proposed by Gibbs & Simpson (2005), under which assessment and feedback support and affect learning. The research tool is a 73-item questionnaire consisting of 14 groups of questions, built upon these conditions. The results reveal that effective, detailed, regular and forward-looking feedback significantly relates to students’ motivation, understanding and learning. They also set the basis for further research and changes in the feedback form HOU students receive.

Η αξιολόγηση παίζει καθοριστικό ρόλο στην εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση, καθώς βοηθά τους διδάσκοντες και τους φοιτητές να αποδίδουν καλύτερα, να σχεδιάζουν στρατηγικές, να θέτουν προτεραιότητες και να παρακολουθούν την πρόοδο των φοιτητών μέσω των γραπτών εργασιών και της ανατροφοδότησης. Οι συχνές εργασίες αποτελούν τον ακρογωνιαίο λίθο της εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευσης και καθιερώνουν έναν διάλογο μεταξύ
foiitptwn kai didaskóntwn, ótan oi deúteroi kathodoignv touc prwtouc sthn éreuna, thn
piontikí érgaia kai thn autoonóia, symbállonton sth thlítwsh twn strathtgwn
mádhsh kai twn deúteron grappou logos me w evpikoðmhtikwn xholwn. H
anatrophodótita kataktá edáfros sthn e apostásseis ekpaideuvs logo thn epídrasihs
ths sth mádhsh kai thn próodo, kathws schetízetai me tis prósodoikyes twn fóitptwn schetiká
me evngišseis, aittíológhseis, anaistóchamio kai kritikí sképsi, dèmouriugía kíntron kai
prótdaseis veltiwhs. H paróusa pílotikí meléte, h opoia ekponíthke sto M étapiotikí
Prógrámmma Didaskálías ths Agglíkhs ws Zénhs/Diédthous Gíwssas tou Ellhnikou Ænktou
Panhpiasthmou (EAP) kata to akadémiaiko étoos 2015-2016, epixeirei na diarofhsh éi thn
antíktupo ths aixódóghs kai ths anatrophodótiseis sth mádhsh, thn anápuxh
dézosthwn kai th metagnwsh. H meléte basízetai se éna sunólo prwtpódeísewn pou
protádhkan apo tous Gibbs kai Simpson (2005), súmpwna me tis opoies h aixódóghsi kai h
anatrophodótita stpízoun kai epírepazov nh mádhsh. To eruvnithikí ergaléio pou
chrismopoiqhse einai éna erwtpematológi 73 erwthsewn, apoteleúmeno apo 14 omádes
erwthsewn, oi opoies basíizontai se autés tis prwtpódeíseis. Ta aitpeloímata
apokalúptontai óti h apotélésmatikí, léptomérfh, taktkí kai diapofwistikí
anatrophodótita schetízetai sthnantiká me to kíntro, thn kataánokh kai th mádhsh thn
foitptwn. Ótevnon epípsi th bási gia peraitérew éreuna kai diafooropoihiseis sth éntupo
anatrophodótiseis pou lamvánovn oi fóitptes ths EAP.

Key words: Distance learning, formative assessment, written assignments, tutor’s feedback

1. Introduction

Distance education and online learning have been clearly demonstrated to be an effective
alternative to traditional classroom learning (Siemens et al., 2015, p.165), with research
findings reporting “no significant difference” in student learning associated with the course
setting (Domínguez & Ridley, 1999). From the 1970s to the 1990s, research in distance
education was pluralistic and focused on areas such as philosophy and theory, students’
context and motivation, case studies, communication between tutors and students,
organization and evaluation of distance programmes (Holmberg, 1987, in Giosos et al., 2008,
p.52) which add to knowledge, attitudes and skills by means of the use of advanced
technology and quality educational material (Peters, 1971). According to Bers (1999),
distance education not only has profound effects on the roles, necessary skills, relationships,
and ways of doing business for institutional researchers but also involves a number of
challenges regarding the assessment of student learning outcomes. Domínguez & Ridley
(1999) propose a shift in distance education research first, by removing the emphasis from
distance education students and placing it on the course itself and, second, by including
distance education students’ subsequent performance in other classes and their preparation
for further study. The latter, namely student performance and preparation for further study,
depend to a great extent on the form of assessment and the feedback distance education
students receive.

2. Assessment and feedback in Distance Education: Theoretical background

Distance education is structured on specific components: the educational material,
methodology, communication, support and assessment (Mouzakis, 2006, p. 13). Assessment
has an important role to play in distance education, as, according to Rogers (1999), it contributes to tutors’ performance, design of strategies and priorities and monitoring of progress. It is classified into external, through exams, and internal, through assignments (Jumani et al., 2011). Frequent assignments constitute the cornerstone of distance education, establish a dialogue between students and tutors, and render distance education effective (Chander, 1991, in Jumani et al., 2011) when, among other things, tutors guide students in producing quality assignments on their own and provide constructive and supportive comments to facilitate students’ improvement of their assignment writing skills (Jumani et al., 2011; Thanopoulou, 2009, p.151). Assisting learning and teaching strategies, such as negotiating meanings and valuing meaningful activity over correct answers, by employing constructivist theories can be particularly challenging in a distance education context and necessary in diminishing the distance between tutors and students (Schulze, 2009).

Feedback, as a form of communication between tutors and students, is another parameter that gains momentum with the foundation of the Open University in England (Howard, 1987) because of its influence on learning and progress (Race, 1999). Feedback is defined as “information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way” (Ramaprasad, 1983, p. 4), or “information about the gap between actual and reference levels is considered as feedback only when it is used to alter the gap” (Sadler, 1989, p. 121, in Walker, 2009, p.3). The tutor’s role is, therefore, to help students reduce that gap.

The significance of feedback on assignments, albeit under-researched in higher education (Weaver, 2006), is highlighted by several authors (Brown, 2007; Cole et al., 1986; Price, 1997) especially in the context of students’ expectations with regard to explanations, justifications, reflection, critical thinking and suggestions for improvement.

Apart from what the comments in assignments offer, Brown and Glover (2006) mention six categories of comments, including content, skills development, motivation, de-motivation, future study and resources the students could use (Walker, 2009, p.5). Walker (2009) examines what sorts of comments students find usable, in the sense that students could in fact use them either to address their misconceptions or to improve their work in the future, finding that most comments fall within the category of content, which could be usable if accompanied by explanations on corrections. Skills development comments could also be usable for future study, while motivating comments result in encouragement. As we will see below, the findings of the present study partly correlate with this as further reading does not seem to be encouraged much in tutors’ comments.

All these issues hinge on the idea of supportive feedback. Wion (2008) provides a definition of supportive feedback and describes two components of it, the style and the type. According to Wion’s study, feedback is supportive when it supports both the learner and the learning process, provides the learners with opportunities to reflect on their work in affective, cognitive, developmental, metacognitive, motivational, psychomotor and social perspectives as well as with opportunities to develop themselves towards their personal training goals. Three styles of communication between the tutor and the student are mentioned: the declarative, the reiterative and the interrogative one, each of which has a different function and affects the student in a different way. As for the type of feedback, the distinction includes: affective feedback, which could lead to low or high performance, cognitive feedback, which gives the student corrective information, developmental feedback, which could improve the student’s skills and lead to further growth, metacognitive
feedback, which involves critical thinking, self-reflection and metacognition, motivational feedback, which provides encouragement, self-confidence and self-competency, and social feedback, which benefits students through their interaction with the tutors, peers, academic advisors and so on.

Hyland (2001) also stresses the significance of feedback, albeit unexplored, in opening and maintaining a dialogue between tutors and students in the distance learning context. By reporting on several authors (Cole et al., 1986; Jarvis, 1978, Rice et al., 1994; Roberts; 1996; White, 1994, 1995, 1997), she focuses on items essential for marking and feedback in distance education: marking as a means of assessment, communicating knowledge and facilitating learning; a supportive and encouraging approach adopted by tutors giving explanations for the grades, stressing strengths and offering constructive criticism; detailed facilitative comments which could prove most useful and help students develop metacognitive strategies.

Investigating students’ and tutors’ perceptions of useful feedback in the distance language learning context, Hyland (2001) also concludes that most feedback is related to the content of the assignment and less on other variables, such as organization, presentation and learning strategies, whereas the purpose of feedback should be not only for tutors to correct content errors but also to provide long comments on problematic areas, support and encouragement, and promote autonomous learning. The need for tutor training in providing effective feedback also emerges from the present research, as will be shown later. Other issues taken into consideration are the extent to which the nature of marking guides influences the comments tutors provide as well as the extent to which tutors offer comments which might not be usable (see Walker, 2009).

It is evident, therefore, that both assessment and feedback have been the object of research because of their significant role in students’ learning and progress as well as skills development.

3. The research background

The present research is based on factors and a set of conditions proposed by Gibbs & Simpson (2005), under which assessment and feedback support and affect learning, namely the dominant influence of assessment, the decline in formative assessment, the effectiveness of feedback and the influence of feedback on learning, which are going to be discussed below.

3.1. The dominant influence of assessment

It has been argued that what influences students most is not teaching but assessment and assessment procedures, which over the years have made students more strategic so that they orient their effort into what counts or what they think counts in assessment (Miller & Parlett, 1974). Miller & Parlett (1974, in Gibbs & Simpson, 2005, p.5) distinguish students into three types as regards the attention they pay to the tutor’s cues on the examination content: the ‘cue seekers’, the ‘cue conscious’ and the ‘cue deaf’. It has also been supported (Bridges et al., 2002; Chansarkar & Raut-Roy, 1987; Gibbs & Lucas, 1997) that modules with coursework assignments give students higher marks than modules with 100% examinations, and are not less valid, as they predict long-term learning of course content and subsequent
performance at work. Moreover, students prefer assignments to exams for reasons of fairness, measurement of a greater range of abilities and organization of work patterns.

3.2. The decline in formative assessment

As reported by Gibbs & Simpson (2005), the number of assignments and, consequently, the feedback received by students has declined over the years in conventional institutions in England while at Open University the feedback received is fifty times as much in a degree programme as at conventional universities. Great emphasis is also placed on frequent assignments, timely, comprehensive and quality feedback and tutor training, since it is acknowledged that feedback constitutes the main form of interaction between students and tutors as well as students’ guidance into tackling assignments and learning.

3.3. The effectiveness of feedback

As regards the effectiveness of feedback, there has been a controversy between tutors and students (Hounsell, 1987; Lea & Street, 1998; Maclellan, 2001) over the way in which feedback helps students understand and learn and prompts discussion with the tutor. In some cases, feedback is just thrown away if the mark is disliked or perceived as indicating the student’s merit in relation to others (norm-referenced). This leads to a discussion (Black & William, 1998) of the absence of an overall mark so that feedback is studied more carefully. Despite the opposed views, feedback remains a significant factor in focusing on important aspects of the course material, assisting learning, developing students’ skills and increasing mastery.

3.4. The influence of feedback on learning

Feedback is beneficial in the sense that it provides students with opportunities to perform, receive suggestions for improvement, reflect on their learning, assess themselves and correct errors (Bruner, 1974; Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

An attempt to reveal the way assessment can support learning is made by Gibbs & Simpson (2005, p.12) by offering a set of 10 ‘conditions’ in two categories of influence: “the influence of the design of assessment systems and assignments on how much students study, what they study and on the quality of their engagement, and the influence of feedback on learning.”

More specifically, the first condition, “sufficient assessed tasks are provided for students to capture sufficient study time” is related to the time students allocate themselves to learn. However, there is evidence that students’ effort is associated with motivation, not the time they spend studying (Kember et al., 1996).

The second condition, “these tasks are engaged with by students, orienting them to allocate appropriate amounts of time and effort to the most important aspects of the course”, is related to the quality of effort which is involved throughout the course, with frequent assignments so that intensive studying just before the final exam is avoided.

The third condition, “tackling the assessed task engages students in productive learning activity of an appropriate kind” connects assignments and group projects to helpful and appropriate learning activity, effective study strategies, quality learning processes and
constructive argumentation despite the fact that students sometimes treat assignments as a way to maximize their marks.

The fourth condition, “sufficient feedback is provided, both often enough and in enough detail” refers to formative assessment and focuses on regular, frequent, prompt and small pieces of feedback to support learning.

The fifth condition, “the feedback focuses on students’ performance, on their learning and on actions under the students control, rather than on the students themselves and on their characteristic”, supports grades being accompanied by feedback related to students’ actions so as to encourage learning, and not to their personality, which is demotivating and damages students’ self-efficacy, and, as a result, their effort and persistence (Schunk, 1984).

The sixth condition, “the feedback is timely in that it is received by students while it still matters to them and in time for them to pay attention to further learning or receive further assistance”, stresses the significance of timely feedback before students move on to further content, and feedback is then irrelevant or unlikely to foster additional learning.

The seventh condition, “feedback is appropriate to the purpose of the assignment and to its criteria for success”, relates feedback to the goals (high- or low-level) set for the assignment. Feedback serves a number of functions, such as correcting errors, developing understanding, generating learning, promoting metacognition and the development of generic skills, motivating and encouraging students for further studying. In that sense, students need to know the criteria and standards set in order to understand completely why they have got a specific grade and what they should have done to get a higher one. At this point, self- and peer-assessment through checklists could be valuable and enhance reliability of marks, while sharing, group discussion and evaluation of good practices could be an exemplar and set high-level goals.

The eighth condition, “feedback is appropriate, in relation to students’ understanding of what they are supposed to be doing”, is related to the clarity of tasks set in the assignments so that the tasks are fully comprehensible to students and reveal learning not as mere memorization of information but as understanding and “a change in personal reality” (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005, p. 22). Thus, feedback has to be sensitive to what kind of writing students are expected to produce.

The ninth condition, “feedback is received and attended to”, relates feedback to students’ paying attention to the comments and not only having a look at the mark. Some steps, including self-assessment, two-stage assignments, and so on, are reported by Gibbs & Simpson (2005, p. 24) to engage students with feedback.

The tenth condition, “feedback is acted upon by the student”, concerns the impact of feedback on future learning. Whether or not feedback helps students’ metacognition and monitoring of their performance depends on several variables, such as timeliness, specificity, contextuality, encouragement and follow-up action (Gibbs & Simpson 2005, p. 25).

The aforementioned conditions could be used as a checklist by tutors in order to test and review the effectiveness of their assessment standards or expanded into a set of questions, as in the case of the present research, to further elaborate on the assessment system used and make appropriate changes in the future.
4. The research context

4.1. The research objectives

At the Hellenic Open University, written assignments are marked and commented on by part-time tutors by following pre-defined marking guidelines and completing a standard cover sheet which is uploaded on the programme platform with the marked assignment and in-text comments. The present study aimed to elucidate the extent to which the aforementioned conditions are satisfied in the assessment procedure followed at the specific University.

The study was conducted during the academic year 2015-2016 at the Hellenic Open University by e-mailing the questionnaire directly to students attending the post-graduate programme “The Teaching of English as a Foreign/International Language” and to tutors in order for them to forward the questionnaire to their students. All in all, 30 questionnaires were collected.

4.2. The participants

Despite the effort to include students from other modules, there was not much response, so most participants (75%) were students recently attending the module of testing and assessment in language learning. All the participants were graduates of the English Department, mostly of the University of Athens. Most of them were 31-40 (34.5%) or 41-50 (34.5%) years old. They lived in different parts of Greece, the majority in Athens (56.5%). The majority also worked for the public sector (57.1%) and the rest (42.9%) for the private sector. Almost eight out of ten had chosen to study at the Hellenic Open University for professional growth, i.e. teacher development. Other reasons included specialization, relating studies to work and getting a post-graduate degree. Their expectations included: developing teaching skills, approaches and effectiveness (52.4%), designing communicative tests (23.8%), learning about methods of assessment (9.5%); using technology, getting personal development and pleasure (4.8% each). As for their goals, they related to applying methods of assessment to practice and constructing valid tests (30%), developing teaching skills and materials (25%), life-long learning (25%), enhancing students’ interest, doing further research, working abroad or running their own school (5% each).

4.3. Description of the research tool

The research tool is a 73-item (5-point Likert scale) questionnaire, built upon the conditions and the theoretical framework described above. It consists of 14 groups of questions, i.e., the aforementioned theoretical factors (the dominant influence of assessment, the decline of formative assessment, the effectiveness of feedback, the influence of feedback on learning) and the ten conditions of assessment (see sections 3.1-3.4). Through the research tool an attempt is made to explore students’ attitude towards written assignments and the feedback they receive.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cronbach's Alpha</th>
<th>N of Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.810</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1. Reliability Statistics*
The reliability of the research tool was tested and found to be considerably high (Fig. 1).

The first group of questions concerns the dominant influence of assessment (subsection 3.1) and consists of seven questions (1-7) which explore students' attitude towards assignments compared with exams in terms of marks, fairness, range of abilities, work organization, validity and prediction of long-term learning of the module.

The second group relates to the decline in formative assessment, consists of five questions (8-12) and explores what kind of feedback would be helpful to the students, based on the theory that regular, formative assignments and frequent and detailed feedback are central to student learning (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005, p. 8).

The third group concerns the effectiveness of feedback, explores students' opinion of the significance of marks and feedback and consists of eight questions (13-20). The fourth and fifth groups refer to conditions 1 and 2, i.e. effort and time allocated to assignments, with three (21-23) and two (24-25) questions respectively. The sixth group refers to condition 3 and consists of four questions (26-29), which relate assignments to learning. The seventh group concerns the influence of feedback on learning with three questions (30-32). The eighth group refers to condition 4, regularity and detail of the feedback received, with three questions (33-35), while the ninth group deals with condition 5, students' errors, with three questions (36-38). The tenth group, consisting of two questions (39-40), relates to condition 6, timely feedback, and the eleventh group refers to condition 7, i.e. the relation of the feedback to the goals set in the assignment, and includes twelve questions (41-52). The twelfth group refers to condition 8, including four questions (53-56), which relate feedback to students' understanding.

The thirteenth group relates to condition 9, students' attention to the feedback comments, and includes six questions (57-62), and finally, the fourteenth group refers to condition 10, the impact of feedback on future learning, and includes eleven questions (63-73).

5. The research results

The research results are clustered in tables 1-9 (valid percent, analyzed by the statistical programme SPSS) and discussed below along the lines of the aforementioned groups of questions.

As regards the first group of questions (Table 1), which contrasts assignments to final exams, almost half of the participants state that their marks in the assignments were higher than in the final exams. More than six out of ten think that assignments are fairer than exams, and almost all of them are of the opinion that assignments measure a greater range of abilities than exams and allow them to organize work to a greater extent than exams. About eight out of ten students prefer half or more of their marks to come from assignments, as they believe in their validity and prediction value with regard to long-term learning of the module content.

As regards what would be helpful to students (Table 2, 2nd group), 80% of the students think that the personalized and timely feedback they receive on assignments helps them cope with the final exams, and fewer than half of them need more detailed feedback. Almost nine out of ten believe the oral feedback they get from the tutor at the meetings offers them
guidance for the assignments, while six out of ten think that problem sheets and group work activities done at the meetings help them cope with the assignments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>totally agree</th>
<th>agree</th>
<th>neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>disagree</th>
<th>totally disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 I got higher marks in the assignments than in the exams.</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 I think assignments are fairer than exams.</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 I think assignments measure a greater range of abilities than exams.</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 I think assignments allow me to organize my work to a greater extent than exams.</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 I prefer half or more of my marks to come from assignments.</td>
<td>70.0</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 I think that assignments are a valid form of assessment.</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 I think that assignments are a better predictor of long-term learning of the module content than exams are.</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Assignments compared to exams

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>totally agree</th>
<th>agree</th>
<th>neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>disagree</th>
<th>totally disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8 The personalized feedback I receive on assignments helps me cope with the final exams.</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 I need more detailed feedback.</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Problem sheets and group work activities done at the meetings help me cope with the assignments.</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Oral feedback I get from the tutor at the meetings offers me guidance for the assignments.</td>
<td>55.2</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 The feedback I get is timely.</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Feedback and learning

A far as the significance of feedback (Table 3, 3rd group) is concerned, all the participating students feel that the feedback they get from the tutor is really important, prompts discussion with the tutor (75%), generally supports learning and helps them understand and learn (almost 90%). It also seems that almost all students pay attention to the feedback they get rather than the grade and they would not be satisfied with only a general feedback report (almost 80%). The grade does not seem to be norm-referenced (about 40%), nor is it related to students’ self-efficacy.
Questions	
totally agree
totally disagree
13 I think the tutor writing comments on assignments is important. 70.0 30.0
14 I am satisfied with only a general feedback report. 3.4 13.8 3.4 62.1 17.2
15 The feedback I receive on assignments is helpful in understanding and learning. 56.7 36.7 6.7
16 The feedback prompts discussion with the tutor. 34.5 41.4 24.1
17 I usually have a look at the mark and throw the feedback away. 3.4 24.1 72.4
18 The grade indicates where I stand in relation to others. 3.3 30.0 23.3 26.7 16.7
19 A poor grade damages my self-efficacy. 6.7 23.3 43.3 23.3 3.3
20 The feedback provided is effective in supporting learning. 43.3 46.7 3.3 3.3 3.3

Table 3: Effectiveness of feedback

The factors that contribute to the effort allocated to assignments (4th group, see Table 4) are motivation and employment (70%), and it is not affected by peer-embarrassment, as experience reveals. Most students (about 70%) distribute their time and study effort (5th group) across the course and avoid intensive studying before the assignment deadline.

Table 4: Effort and time allocated to assignments

From the responses obtained, it seems that assignments (Table 5, 6th group) are primarily connected to learning (over 90%), give students the opportunity to use the discourse of the discipline, and provide a framework for the learning activities of “reading around” and “constructing arguments” (see Gibbs & Simpson, 2005, p. 15) to a large extent (80%). Only half of the participant students tackle them as activities to maximize their marks.

Not only assignments but also feedback (Table 6) is related to learning (7th group), since it includes suggestions for improvement, gives chances to reflect on what has already been learnt and what is to be learnt as well as chances to assess oneself (over 80%). About six to seven out of ten students believe that the feedback they get is regular and detailed (8th group), while the adoption of computer-based testing does not seem to help in the direction
of remedial feedback. Most students (over 80%) believe that the feedback focuses on areas (9th group) where they have gone wrong and on future action, and not on personal characteristics. They also largely think (over 80%) that feedback is timely, that is received while it still matters, so that they could pay attention to further learning or receive further assistance (10th group).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>totally agree</th>
<th>agree</th>
<th>neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>totally disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26 Assignments give me the opportunity to use the discourse of the discipline.</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 Assignments give me the opportunity to &quot;read around&quot; and &quot;construct arguments&quot;.</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 I tackle assignments so as to maximize the marks I obtain.</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 I tackle assignments so as to maximize the learning achieved from engaging with the assignment.</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Assignments as related to learning

As regards the relation of the feedback received to the goals of the assignment (Table, 7, 11th group), almost all students are of the opinion that the feedback is appropriate to the purpose of the assignment (96.7%), promotes metacognition (86.7%), develops understanding (82.7%), and supplies explanation for the mark given (80%). More than half of them believe that the feedback is used to correct errors (65.5%) and to promote the development of generic skills (63.3%), while fewer than half of them think that it suggests further studying (43.4%). As for the criteria, it is evident that model answers and good practices (90%) as well as self-assessment (73.3%) establish high expectations and motivation. According to the respondents, the criteria include high-level goals (86.7%) rather than low-level ones (55.1%), and are explicit and comprehensible (73.3%). The feedback also seems to relate to students’ understanding (12th group), since it provides sufficient information on appropriate tackling of the task (76.6%), clears up misunderstandings (69%) and clarifies what the tutor is looking for in an assignment (63.3%), and does not treat learning as passive acquisition of information.

As regards students’ attention to the feedback comments (Table, 8, 13th group), all students read the tutor’s comments when they receive the assignment back. A large number (66.7%) would like to have a second chance by getting the feedback first so as to improve their mark, but not only the feedback without a mark. It does not seem to be of great importance to students to self-assess themselves and be provided with a mark after self-assessment, or specify what they would like feedback on.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>totally agree</th>
<th>agree</th>
<th>neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>totally disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30 The feedback I get includes suggestions for improvement.</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 The feedback I get gives me chances to reflect on what I have learnt and what I still have to learn.</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32 The feedback I get gives me chances to assess myself.</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>62.1</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33 The feedback I get is regular.</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The feedback I get is detailed and extensive.

I think that the adoption of computer-based testing would provide remedial feedback.

The feedback I get tells me where I have gone wrong.

The feedback tells me what I can do about things I did wrong (future action).

The feedback I get has a critical focus on personal characteristics.

I receive feedback fast enough, while it still matters.

Table 6: Feedback related to learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>totally agree</th>
<th>agree</th>
<th>neither agree</th>
<th>disagree</th>
<th>totally disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The feedback is appropriate to the purpose of the assignment.</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The feedback is used to correct errors.</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The feedback is used to develop understanding through explanations.</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>51.7</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The feedback is used to generate more learning by suggesting further specific study tasks.</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The feedback is used to promote the development of generic skills (applied across a variety of subject domains).</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The feedback is used to promote metacognition by encouraging my reflection on and awareness of learning processes involved in the assignment.</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The feedback explains why I have got a specific assignment mark.</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The criteria for a successful assignment are explicit and understood.</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The criteria include low-level goals (e.g. style and presentation).</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>44.8</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The criteria include high-level goals (e.g. theoretical and conceptual understanding).</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model answers and good practices establish high expectations and motivation.</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>53.3</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-assessment (e.g. use of rubrics) helps me internalize high expectations.</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>53.3</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The feedback provides sufficient information about whether I have tackled the task appropriately.</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>53.3</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What the tutor is looking for in an assignment is quite clear.</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The feedback is sensitive to the unsophisticated conceptions of learning (learning as passive reception or active memorization of information) that might be revealed in my work.</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>44.8</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The feedback helps me clear up any misunderstandings (e.g. about the content of the conclusion).</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>55.2</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Feedback related to the goals of the assignment

The feedback I get is detailed and extensive.

I think that the adoption of computer-based testing would provide remedial feedback.

The feedback I get tells me where I have gone wrong.

The feedback tells me what I can do about things I did wrong (future action).

The feedback I get has a critical focus on personal characteristics.

I receive feedback fast enough, while it still matters.

Table 6: Feedback related to learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>totally agree</th>
<th>agree</th>
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<tr>
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<td>26.7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The feedback is used to promote the development of generic skills (applied across a variety of subject domains).</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The feedback is used to promote metacognition by encouraging my reflection on and awareness of learning processes involved in the assignment.</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The feedback explains why I have got a specific assignment mark.</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The criteria for a successful assignment are explicit and understood.</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The criteria include low-level goals (e.g. style and presentation).</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>44.8</td>
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</tr>
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<td>36.7</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model answers and good practices establish high expectations and motivation.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>20.0</td>
<td>53.3</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The feedback provides sufficient information about whether I have tackled the task appropriately.</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>53.3</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What the tutor is looking for in an assignment is quite clear.</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The feedback is sensitive to the unsophisticated conceptions of learning (learning as passive reception or active memorization of information) that might be revealed in my work.</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>44.8</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The feedback helps me clear up any misunderstandings (e.g. about the content of the conclusion).</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>55.2</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8: Students’ attention to the feedback comments

Finally, as for the impact of feedback on future learning (Table, 9, 14th group), all or almost all students believe that feedback is realistic (100%), guides them on how to deal with the next assignments (93.4%), and does not lead to less study effort (96.7%) or just corrects errors (90%). Most of them think that feedback does not come late (83.3%), is rather forward-than backward-looking (73.3%), does not demand something the students do not know how to do (70%), or applies only to the particular assignment (66%). Most students would like to have group discussions so as to develop metacognition (66.6%) as well as a follow-up so as to check if they have taken any action (63.4%).

Table 9: Impact of feedback on future learning
5. Discussion and further suggestions

The research findings presented in the previous section reveal the significance of assessment and feedback in Distance Education students’ learning, reflection and metacognition.

It is evident that assignments as a formative assessment tool and the feedback provided to students have a significant contribution to motivation and learning. Assignments measure a wide range of abilities, give students the opportunity to use the discourse of the discipline, allow them to organize their work in a better way and provide fairer results than exams, which could possibly make tutors reconsider the allocation of marks to assignments.

Timely, realistic and forward-looking feedback on written assignments is also of utmost importance. It includes suggestions for improvement and helps students understand, learn and cope with the final exams. It also enhances study effort, promotes metacognition, gives students chances to reflect on learning and assess themselves, and guides them on how to deal with future assignments. In addition, oral feedback, discussion at the contact sessions, problem sheets and group work activities help with learning and offer guidance. Model answers, good practices and self-assessment rubrics are criteria which establish high expectations and motivation. Thus, they should be integrated as established practices in contact sessions; good practices could be shared or uploaded on a special forum, and checklists could be constructed to help students think of the criteria set in each assignment and assess themselves. Since, due to deadlines, it is impossible to provide students with the feedback first so as to help them make improvements and then give the mark, a good practice could be to analytically comment on, discuss and provide feedback on the first assignment so that students would be able to effectively deal with the next assignments. In order to be effective, feedback should be detailed, suggest further studying and promote self-assessment. This leads us to question and probably reconsider the criteria used (content, language skills, literature used and application of theory to practice) and the comments made in the feedback form, so as to promote further studying, student learning and metacognition, according to the data of the research.

Naturally, further action research is necessary in order to diagnose problems with the courses, reform assessment to address these problems and meet students’ needs, and evaluate whether the changes made have a positive impact on learning (Gibbs and Simpson, 2005). It would also be interesting to use the specific research tool in order to correlate variables such as the type of feedback provided with students’ motivation, effort and learning.

6. Conclusion

The present study was a pilot research conducted at the Hellenic Open University and explored the conditions under which assessment and feedback affect learning. The research was developed on the set of conditions proposed by Gibbs and Simpson (2005), under which assessment and feedback support students’ learning.

From the research and the results analyzed above, it seems that these conditions are satisfied: Assessment, especially formative assessment, and effective, detailed and regular feedback, related to the goals of the assignments, have a dominant influence on students’ understanding and learning. Assignments, as a form of formative assessment, also relate to learning and affect students’ motivation and the time and effort allocated to them. Another
significant factor for Distance Education students is that formative assessment and feedback support communication between students and tutors.

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Θανοπούλου, Μ. (2009). «Οι προτιμώμενοι τρόποι μάθησης, στο πλαίσιο της εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευσης, σύμφωνα με το μοντέλο εμπειρικής μάθησης του Kolb: Η περίπτωση των μεταπτυχιακών φοιτητών στα προγράμματα “Σπουδές στην Εκπαίδευση”».
και “Εκπαίδευση Ενηλίκων” του Ελληνικού Ανοικτού Πανεπιστημίου». Διπλωματική Εργασία. Πάτρα: ΕΑΠ.

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Assignment feedback in distance education: How do students perceive it?

Georgia KREONIDOU & Vassilia KAZAMIA

This study explores 147 postgraduate students’ perceptions of tutor assignment feedback in the Hellenic Open University context. The participants are both first and second year students of the Master’s in Education in the Teaching of English as a Foreign/International Language. Their perceptions on feedback aspects like effectiveness, challenges and personal preferences are examined. Students’ response to feedback and their contact with the tutor for extra oral feedback are within the scope of the study as well, while a questionnaire with closed-ended items was the research instrument allowing quantitative analysis. Although the findings confirmed the importance of feedback and an overall sense of satisfaction, there were indications that error correction issues concerning content and theory are not addressed properly through the feedback provided. Student contact with the tutor either for clarifications or extra oral feedback when problems arise is limited, too. Overall, the current study has revealed significant findings in feedback matters, which may be constructive for the structure of tutors’ feedback writing.
periechόμενο, τη δεσιρία και τη διόρθωση λαθών δεν αντιμετωπίζονται ικανοποιητικά μέσω της ανατροφοδότησης. Η επικουρικότητα του φοιτητή με τον καθηγητή είτε για διευκρινήσεις είτε για πρόσθετα προφορικά σχόλια όταν εμφανίζονται προβλήματα είναι επίσης περιορισμένη. Συνεπάγως, η παρούσα μελέτη αποκαλύπτει σημαντικά ευρήματα σχετικά με θέματα ανατροφοδότησης, τα οποία μπορεί να λειτουργήσουν εποικοδομητικά στην οργάνωση της γραπτής ανατροφοδότησης από τους καθηγητές.

**Key words:** Distance education, assignment feedback, student perceptions, feedback effectiveness, student-tutor communication, oral feedback

### 1. Introduction

During the previous years, the fast pace of life along with the never-ending duties made it difficult for potential postgraduate students to enroll in Master’s programs where regular class attendance was compulsory. Thus, the need for more flexible studies paved the way for the growth of distance learning contexts.

Along with the flourishing of Distance Education (DE), there has been a growing interest in tutor feedback which is regarded as crucial to students’ academic performance. This is due to the significance of feedback for students’ academic development, independence and learning progress (Evans, 2013) and its centrality in the assessment process (Price et al., 2010). In distance learning contexts, feedback is mainly formative in order to make students continuously aware of their ongoing progress, facilitate reflection and trigger constructive changes (Alvarez et al., 2012). At the Hellenic Open University (HOU) specifically, written corrective feedback on assignments is the way through which tutors indicate students’ errors and enlighten them on their academic progress. By indicating their errors and giving feedback, tutors enable students to process their written product and apply changes to their future written work (Nicol, 2010). In other words, giving feedback acts as a feed-forward process on students’ future coursework and it is mainly utilized to inform and lead their next assignments to the better (Orsmond et al., 2013). Apart from this, feedback is considered to act as an aid and encouragement for future written assignments and as a boost for students to reach their writing skills’ potential, which highlights the pedagogical contribution it can have on students’ self-confidence (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

However, despite its central role, feedback can become troublesome as there may be misconceptions, lack of clarity and, as a result, dissatisfaction with it (Nicol et al., 2014). Feedback comments may have adverse effects on students’ self-confidence when they are not clear, thus obstructing proper interpretation and reducing effectiveness (Hilgenberg & Tolone, 2000). Lateness of feedback delivery which hinders the feedforward process (Hounsell, 2003) and students’ inability to understand the academic language of feedback comments (Higgins et al., 2001) have been reported as discouraging factors as well. Consequently, when the quality of feedback suffers, the feedforward process may become a negative experience for students, hindering their smooth, academic progress.

Considering the cases previously mentioned, it seems important to improve the quality of feedback by exploring the recipients’ perceptions, in other words by examining how students view, interpret and respond to the feedback delivered. This study aims to address this need by researching students’ perceptions of tutor feedback in the postgraduate Program of the HOU titled as ‘The Teaching of English as a Foreign/International Language’.
The article first presents the theoretical framework and the connection between DE and feedback. Second, it presents the research design and next, it reports research results and discusses them. Concluding remarks follow.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Feedback as part of DE practices

Since the late eighties, DE has been gaining popularity as compared to face to face education in traditional universities where attendance is compulsory (Sewart, 1993). DE is outlined as both one and two-way traffic communication between the learners and the institution where they study for example the university (Holmberg, 1989). In DE contexts, the centrality of learning as an individual activity is a cornerstone as it contributes greatly to the creation of autonomous learners who become able to control and regulate their own learning experience (White, 2005). As a result, they become less dependent on the tutor and more responsible for their studies (Matuga, 2007). Another central feature of DE is that, just like education in traditional universities, it encourages students to develop cognitive abilities like critical thinking which encompass mastery of other sub-skills necessary to process study material properly and effectively (Price, 1997).

As was previously suggested, feedback is an integral feature of DE practices and the tool students utilize to take responsibility for their own learning, achieve autonomy and progress in their studies. As a notion, it is considered to be intrinsically complex so it is difficult to provide a single definition for it. It was once integrally connected with the idea of assessment as it was frequently used to inform a learner about the degree of correctness (Gagne, 1985) or the result of one’s performance or understanding of the study material (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Also, the positive or negative reinforcement role of feedback as an external stimulus was attributed by Skinner (1968). Following the traditional definition of feedback and a closed-system thinking manner, feedback took corrective action and adopted the role of putting things right (Price et al., 2010).

However, recent studies have given feedback new perspectives as researchers have argued that simply informing students about whether they are right or wrong is not particularly productive so they redefined feedback as a reciprocal process through which input is received and reconstructed between the tutor and the learner in order for the latter to really benefit from it (Nicol, 2010; Sadler, 2010). Feedback became synonymous with notions like reinforcement, correction and benchmarking (Price et al., 2010), a feed-forward process to support learning (Hounsell et al., 2008) and was aptly described as “the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter” (Ramaprasad, 1983, in Walker, 2009, p. 4). Additionally, a dialogic dimension of feedback which engages both the tutor and the learner in a process of discussing so as to build blocks of understanding and encourage reflection was suggested by Hewings & Coffin (2006). It therefore seems that feedback is multifaceted in nature and definitely a useful tool in students’ academic course.

2.2. Role and meaningfulness of feedback in DE

Feedback in DE is central and carries multiple roles. It can be informative as it is a channel of information including elaborate commentary concerning both structure and content in an attempt to consolidate students’ learning. Also, it carries a pedagogical role boosting students to reach their writing skills’ potential (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Feedback may also assume reflective and future gap-altering roles. Its reflective role lies in the fact that tutors’
comments may engage learners in a state of reflection which will trigger inner thoughts and help them develop a critical view of their assignments (Walker, 2009). Since a great deal of feedback is designed in a way that will initiate future changes once problematic areas are spotted (Walker, 2009), a gap-altering role can be attributed to it. In other words, feedback makes students take a look beyond tutor comments by considering how to reduce future gaps and avoid making the same mistakes (Walker, 2009). This process is part of a wider cognitive and metacognitive function of gaining insight beyond errors and triggering a thinking process (Kulhavy & Stock, 1989).

The overall importance of feedback and especially in assignment writing seems quite central in DE. Grading students’ written work and assignments alone is just a typical part of assessment which only measures and rates their performance and comprehension of study material. The importance of feedback lies in the fact that it shapes learning behaviors and informs students about the status of their written product compared to the desired level so, they become more able to bridge the gap (Sadler, 1989). It is a crucial intervention in the course of learning without which learning is not complete (Chokwe, 2015).

Therefore, according to researchers, feedback in distance learning contexts is an integral part of the learning process whose contribution to academic progress is considered indisputable. That is why studying students’ perceptions of it, may prove fruitful.

2.3. Feedback and the case of the Hellenic Open University

The HOU, is a distance learning institution which offers flexible higher education studies. The idea of self-instruction is promoted as students study the specially designed material on their own (Holmberg, 2002) while attending contact sessions is not compulsory. Additionally, self-regulated learning\(^1\) is promoted as the nature of the study material engages learners in acquisition of knowledge through critical thinking and the development of cognitive skills (Zimmerman & Schunk, 1989).

According to HOU’s regulations, in order to successfully pass a module, students submit four written assignments through which their academic writing skills and their understanding of the subject matter are evaluated and they also participate in written final exams. The required academic writing skills do not only involve conceptual knowledge on the subject area of the domain or a good command of the language system and forms, but also a number of extra features this genre involves (Sifakis et al., 2008) such as conventions like quoting and paraphrasing along with macro-skills like planning, drafting and revising. At a deeper level of writing, students need to be able to present other writers’ work in order to add validity to their own words, avoid plagiarism or foreground agreement/disagreement with current beliefs (Sifakis et al., 2008). Students’ written assignments are the basis on which they receive both a grade awarded according to several marking criteria and constructive commentary in the form of written comments.

On the basis of this, it becomes obvious that the specifications concerning assignment writing are demanding and the academic writing skills the students should master during their studies are of a high standard. Additionally, considering that assignment feedback at the HOU is the means which encourages and promotes students’ academic skills

\(^1\) Academic self-regulation is essentially defined as students’ personal systematic effort to manage their own learning in order to achieve their goals by strategically planning, monitoring and regulating their studies. (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011).
development, its importance seems undeniable and it is also highly probable that it might have a decisive impact on students’ performance and achievement.

2.4. Importance of studying students’ perceptions

Essentially, the importance of exploring students’ perceptions at the HOU is twofold. On the one hand, examining perceptions is important for tutors as it helps them gain access into students’ inner thoughts. This will reveal whether they follow their tutors’ advice on how to work and exploit feedback as well as if and why feedback is sometimes ill-conceived. It will also help prevent potential damaging effects on students’ future development (Hunt, 2001). Additionally, studying beliefs and perceptions can influence behaviors and improve professional practices (Borg, 2006), so tutors will be able to adapt the form of the feedback they offer and customize it to students’ needs.

On the other hand, exploring students’ perceptions is valuable for students themselves in that they will be able to gain more conscious insight into their personal reactions. Involving them in a thinking process will make them more aware of feedback matters, help them to adopt a more effective attitude and change less appropriate behaviors towards reception and use of feedback. Let us not forget that tutors’ written comments are also the voices which show learners how to develop their own voice to evolve as academic writers by clarifying dark areas so examining how learners perceive their tutors’ voice is invaluable (Hendricks & Queen, 2000).

Therefore, students’ perceptions should be further examined, so the quality and impact of feedback at the HOU is more specifically identified and its positive or negative features are revealed.

3. Research Design and Methodology

3.1. Research Purpose and Questions

Generally, feedback processes are not without obstacles and the question why feedback becomes troublesome cannot be really answered unless insight into students’ perceptions is gained. The effects of feedback, student-tutor interaction as a form of social and academic discourse (Black, 1998) as well as the quality, the speed, interpretation and disposition towards feedback (York, 2003) are aspects to be examined in the process of investigating students’ perceptions. Higgins et al. (2001) interestingly mention that feedback is an inherent act of educational dialogue between the tutor and the student. So, in order to examine if and why it may be troublesome, we need to examine its nature as an act of communication. Additionally, proof that feedback affects learning exists (Falchikov, 1995), but in order to determine the way and the extent, we need to reveal students’ perceptions in aspects like comprehensibility of tutor comments (Higgins, 2000), features of feedback that make it less effective and the quality of its form. In the light of the above, the main research questions could be articulated as follows:

1. How do students consult and use tutor feedback?
2. Do they have enough constructive communication with the tutor?
3. Do students perceive feedback as effective?
4. What do they perceive as troublesome feedback features?
5. What are students’ preferences with regard to the form of feedback provided?
The analysis of the data collected will hopefully provide substantial insight into students’ perceptions of tutor feedback which may trigger future positive and strategic changes on the part of students, tutors and HOU’s academic community alike. By finding out about the most significant findings that will arise, students will hopefully involve themselves in a thinking process on aspects such as whether they need to adapt their strategies towards the use of feedback or examine their personal communication with the tutor in a more in-depth manner. Also, as tutors are the providers of feedback, the onus is on them to make it usable, effective and motivating. Thus, after gaining a clear image of how their students really view it, they may try to customize it to students’ needs better. Last but not least, the findings may help develop the quality of the HOU as academic community in that they may be constructive for the future structure of tutors’ written feedback.

3.2. Research Context, Methodology and Tool

The context of the present research is the postgraduate department of the HOU which leads to a Master’s degree in “The Teaching of English as a Foreign/International Language”. The research participants were all students who, at the time of the research, attended one or two modules, either compulsory or elective. Aiming to employ the quantitative method, the sampling process attempted to collect as much data as possible in order to cover a representative and adequate number of the research target population (Cohen et al., 2005). Finally, 147 research returns were collected.

The present research has a trends measurement orientation. As it adopts a quantitative approach, it is purely information gathering (Bell, 2010) and the outcomes are product-oriented and objective as well (Chaudron, 1988). Moreover, extraction of numerical data and statistical information allows for straightforward tabulation and coding, enhancing objectivity, too (Dörnyei, 2010), and renders the actual presentation of data more accurate (Brown & Rodgers, 2002). So, it was decided that the main research instrument would be a structured questionnaire including close-ended items. If it reaches a large number of respondents, the close-ended items will facilitate statistical analysis that will generate reliable frequencies of responses (Oppenheim, 1992), as in general, close-ended items in a questionnaire make it easier to classify, measure and generalize perceptions in an objective manner (Becker, 1996).

3.3. Structure and Validity of the questionnaire

The selection of questionnaire items for the questionnaire used in the present study was performed following two approaches. Firstly, the creativity of the researchers was exploited as they formed an item pool with as many items connected to the research questions as they could think of, an approach reported by Dörnyei (2003); yet they expanded to additional external sources as well. Thus, after related research had been consulted, items from already established questionnaires inspired the current construction as they have already been piloted and had proved to have a high level of reliability (Sudman & Bradburn, 1983). A final selection of items from the item pool and the established questionnaires was performed creating a final questionnaire of 34 items, which was the research instrument utilized (see Appendix I).

The final form of the questionnaire consisted of two introductory questions and six parts (A-F). The first introductory question aimed at collecting information on which module the respondents were attending during the academic year in which the research was conducted, whereas the second, collected numerical data on the number of feedback reports each...
respondent had received so far. Part A explored students’ reactions to feedback when they received it and which marking criteria they focused on, through two multiple response questions. Parts B to F examined students’ perceptions and were composed of 5-point Likert scale questions, as they have become very popular among researchers and social scientists when it comes to examining perceptions, attitudes and beliefs (Subedi, 2016). More specifically, Part B explored student-tutor communication (7 items), Part C focused on the consultation of feedback for future assignments (3 items) and Part D examined effectiveness of feedback comments (7 items). Last, Part E searched for troublesome feedback features (7 items) and Part F explored students’ preferences in the form of feedback provided (6 items). The items from Parts B to E were measured through a frequency five-point scale² whereas for Part F, the five-point scale examined students’ level of agreement³ (Vagias, 2006).

Content validity was tested by subjecting the research instrument to a validity test to check whether internal consistency was above acceptable levels. In this case, the statistical result measured with Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient⁴ was .932 indicating high internal reliability according to commonly accepted descriptors (George & Mallery, 2003).

3.4. Piloting and Sampling

The questionnaire was piloted before it was officially distributed in order to detect flaws, identify problems and check accuracy (Rasinger, 2013). Six HOU students completed the electronic questionnaire and pointed out that two questions presented some ambiguity as they were considered a paraphrase of other questions they were extracted. The snowball sampling technique was employed and the total number of respondents to the questionnaire after its mass distribution and promotion in the social media and mailing was 147. Although the number did not represent the whole population, it still offered a representative sample which, due to the satisfactory distribution of answers across all modules (see Appendix II, Table 1), could be relied on (Dörnyei & Csizer, 2012).

4. Quantitative data and discussion

4.1. Method of Analysis

The numerical data were calculated on SPSS and the mean scores extracted are discussed in the following sections.

4.2. Descriptive Analysis and Discussion

4.2.1. Consultation and use of tutor feedback: How do students consult and use feedback? (Research question 1)

Students’ reactions and response towards feedback were examined through two multiple response questions, as already noted. The first question examined how students first respond when they receive the feedback report. 63.3% of the respondents answered that

² The frequency five-point scale ranges as follows: 1= Always, 2= Often, 3= Sometimes, 4= Rarely, 5= Never.
³ The agreement five-point scale represents the following levels: 1= Strongly agree, 2= Partly agree, 3= Neither agree or disagree, 4= Partly disagree, 5= Strongly disagree.
⁴ Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient ranges between negative infinity (0) and 1. The closest to 1 the result is, the more internally valid the tool is considered to be (Gliem & Gliem, 2003).
they follow all four suggested steps\(^5\) one by one whereas the option of looking at the overall mark first collected 28.6% of the responses. The rest of the options collected very few responses indicating a rather low priority in following these steps individually (see Appendix III, Table 2). The second question examined which type of comments students focus more on. The vast majority (80.3%) responded that they focus on all marking criteria whereas preference for individual marking criteria received a limited number of answers. Thus, the majority of students focus on all marking criteria in order to improve and get an overall picture whereas more than half of them suggested that they follow all the suggested steps after they receive the feedback report. However, a sizable minority revealed that they look at the overall mark first (see Appendix III, Table 3). This result cannot be overlooked as marks can sometimes act as an undermining factor when they accompany feedback comments as previous research has revealed (Black & William, 1998).

Concerning the extent of feedback use in forthcoming assignments (Part C), the mean\(^6\) scores revealed interesting data (see Table 1 below). When students were questioned whether they consult feedback again, their answers presented a mean score of 1.79\(^7\) indicating that they actually consult and make use of it. Concerning the careful consideration of feedback in order to avoid the same errors in the next assignment, students’ responses indicated that they almost ‘always’ (m=1,68) follow this process and they ‘almost never’ (m=4.55) start writing the next assignment in their own way, both scores indicating that since students reconsider feedback comments before writing again, they make an extra effort to use them constructively in the following assignments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I consult the feedback again</td>
<td>1,79</td>
<td>1,14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I consider the comments one by one and try to avoid the same mistakes in my next assignment</td>
<td>1,68</td>
<td>1,01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I start writing in my own way as feedback comments are not important</td>
<td>4,55</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1. Use of Feedback (mean scores)*

Overall, it seems that students more often than not consult the feedback again and they also consider the comments in order to avoid the same mistakes in the next assignment. This may suggest that students try to be strategic users of feedback comments. However, if we go into the results in percentages and number of responses as presented in Table 2 below, there is still a minority of students who do not seem to use feedback, strategically or otherwise.

---

\(^5\) The first four suggested answers are the following: a) I look at the overall mark first b) I look at the marks for each marking criterion first c) I read the written comments first d) I compare the feedback comments with the assignment.

\(^6\) In Statistics, the mean score is used to measure the central tendency in numbers and indicate the prevalent inclination of responses (Feller, 1950).

\(^7\) In order to understand what 1.79 stands for, the following exemplification should be taken into account. For Parts B to E of the questionnaire, the Likert frequency scale ranges from Always to Never. Each frequency is represented by a number (Always=1, Often=2, Sometimes=3, Rarely=4, Never=5). So, if the mean score for a question is 1.79 this suggests that the answers range from Often to Always, reflecting a high frequency.
Always | Often | Sometimes | Rarely | Never
--- | --- | --- | --- | ---
Count | Row N % | Count | Row N % | Count | Row N % | Count | Row N %
I consult the feedback again | 83 | 57,2% | 33 | 22,8% | 13 | 9,0% | 9 | 6,2% | 7 | 4,8%
I consider the comments one by one and try to avoid them in my next assignment | 85 | 58,6% | 36 | 24,8% | 13 | 9,0% | 7 | 4,8% | 4 | 2,8%
I start writing in my own way as feedbacks are not important | 5 | 3,4% | 3 | 2,1% | 6 | 4,1% | 25 | 17,1% | 107 | 73,3%

Table 2. Use of Feedback (percentages)

This result possibly suggests that students may not be trained to act strategically or they may not see the value in consulting it repeatedly.

4.2.2. Student-Tutor communication: Do students have enough constructive communication with the tutor? (Research question 2)

With regard to students’ perceptions of their communication with their tutors, the analysis revealed unexpected results. Surprisingly, contact with the tutor both due to mark dissatisfaction reasons and in order to discuss students’ performance even if satisfactory, happens ‘rarely’ to almost ‘never’ (m=4.27), revealing minimal communication and interaction (see Table 3 below). Contact becomes a little more frequent, closer to ‘sometimes’ when students have to deal with comments they find hard to understand and when they wish to be advised on how to improve in the next assignment. However, they ‘often’ (m=2.17) try to understand what went wrong on their own before contacting the tutor, whereas they ‘sometimes’ contact him/her after they have tried hard enough and still face difficulties. Lastly, cases of insecurity with regard to their relationship to the tutor were revealed in students’ responses as they ‘sometimes’ feel uncomfortable contacting the tutor for extra feedback.

Taken together, it becomes evident that students mainly rely on themselves to face troubling feedback matters and they contact their tutor as their last resort confirming Poulos and Mahony’s study (2008), which revealed that students do not grab opportunities for extra oral feedback and they distance themselves from their tutors. There are several possible explanations for these results. Contact avoidance may be due to the fact that students do not actually think that extra oral feedback will be helpful to them or do not realize the positive effects dialogue may have both for motivational purposes and for fixing problems. Another reason for contact avoidance may be because students may not be urged by their tutors to contact them. In any case, the findings are worrying as they suggest that student-tutor communication is limited. However, oral feedback should be an extra tool at students’ disposal as it is more elaborate by offering extra clarifications (Black & McCormick, 2010).
After I receive the tutor’s feedback:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>After I receive the tutor’s feedback:</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I contact the tutor immediately when my mark is not satisfactory</td>
<td>4,28</td>
<td>1,12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I contact the tutor immediately to discuss my performance even if it is</td>
<td>4,27</td>
<td>1,10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>satisfactory</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I contact the tutor only when I do not understand his/her comments</td>
<td>3,01</td>
<td>1,38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I contact the tutor to ask for advice on how to improve my performance</td>
<td>3,21</td>
<td>1,35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I try to understand what went wrong by myself without contacting the tutor</td>
<td>2,17</td>
<td>1,20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I read the comments again the following days and contact the tutor only</td>
<td>2,63</td>
<td>1,33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>if I still don’t understand</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel uncomfortable contacting the tutor to ask for explanations</td>
<td>3,00</td>
<td>1,49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Student-tutor Communication (Mean scores)

4.2.3. Effectiveness of feedback: Do students perceive feedback as effective? (Research question 3)

Concerning tutors’ feedback comments (see Table 4 below), they seem to be perceived by students as of moderate effectiveness as results lie between ‘sometimes’ and ‘often’, especially when it comes to enhancement of students’ understanding of theory. Almost the same holds true of cases regarding the contribution of feedback comments to the correction of mistakes through directing students to the relevant parts of the study material. Enlightening feedback comments which do not create further confusion are ‘often’ provided (m=2.31). Moreover, it seems important to mention that feedback comments ‘often’ act as a means to helping students pass the course and offer effective guidance on their improvement concerning their academic skills. Even more importantly, the effectiveness of feedback also lies in the fact that in cases when performance is not as expected, it ‘often’ acts as a source of encouragement, offering motivation, and clearly spots areas for improvement, providing guidance straight to the point quite ‘often’ too.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The written feedback I receive:</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enhances my understanding of the theory</td>
<td>2,67</td>
<td>1,11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offers guidance to improve my written academic skills</td>
<td>1,94</td>
<td>1,03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tries to correct the mistakes in my assignment by directing me to the</td>
<td>2,50</td>
<td>1,26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>right parts of the study material</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involves enlightening comments that do not create further confusion</td>
<td>2,31</td>
<td>.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages me to continue even if my performance was not as I expected</td>
<td>2,07</td>
<td>1,04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearly identifies areas that require improvement</td>
<td>1,90</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is helpful for me to pass the course</td>
<td>2,20</td>
<td>1,05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Effectiveness of Feedback
Overall, it was observed that effectiveness ranges from medium to good depending on the case. Effectiveness concerning the contribution of feedback to helping students understand the theory and comments that direct students to answers in the study material is rarely evident. Frequency levels increase when it comes to enlightening comments that guide students towards areas of improvement, motivating comments which enhance effectiveness and their contribution to passing the course. These findings are in line with Walker’s (2009) and Weaver’s (2006) studies, which revealed that encouraging comments proved to be effective. On the downside, the fact that there are cases of students who, according to their answers on the effectiveness of feedback, replied that it rarely or never helps them (see Appendix IV, Table 4), indicates that there is still room for improvement in its quality. A similar finding is suggested in Furnborough & Truman’s research, which revealed cases of students who perceived the effectiveness of feedback as weak (2009). Thus, even though it is encouraging that feedback is of good quality in general, the existence of replies which rate the effectiveness of feedback as less frequent (ranging from sometimes and rarely to never), is a cause of concern (see Appendix IV, Table 4).

4.2.4. Troublesome feedback: What do students perceive as troublesome feedback features? (Research question 4)

Interestingly, data do not suggest deeply challenging issues according students’ perceptions (see Table 5 below). To be more specific, students do not really perceive their tutors’ feedback as impersonal as this happens ‘rarely’ to almost ‘never’ (m=4.10), indicating that tutors do not distance themselves from them. The rest of the answers in this section mainly range from ‘rarely’ to ‘sometimes.’ Time-wise, reception of feedback ‘rarely’ (m=3.82) comes close to the next assignment, impeding improvement, and ‘rarely’ comes so late that the student has forgotten the rationale behind the arguments of the assignment that received the feedback. Vagueness in terms of academic writing issues such as APA norms, are ‘rarely’ or ‘sometimes’ spotted and the same happens with cases when the student needs to make a personal effort to understand the feedback. In the same vein, feedback ‘often’ guides students to weak parts of their writing using sign-posted comments and it ‘often’ contributes to the mark of the next assignment. Overall, the descriptive analysis revealed that students do not consider feedback impersonal. However, they still feel uncomfortable contacting the tutor as contact avoidance characterizes the course of their studies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The written feedback I receive:</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seems impersonal making me feel unimportant for the tutor</td>
<td>4.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involves extra personal effort to understand</td>
<td>3.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not always contribute to the improvement of my next assignment’s grade</td>
<td>3.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comes very close to the submission of the next assignment leaving no room for improvement</td>
<td>3.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comes belated, so I have forgotten the rationale behind my arguments</td>
<td>3.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not include signposted comments on the problematic parts on the actual assignment</td>
<td>3.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involves vague comments in terms of errors connected with APA norms</td>
<td>3.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Troublesome features of feedback (Mean scores)
The finding that contact avoidance is not due to impersonal feedback suggests that the reason for student-tutor limited communication does not stem from the tutors’ stance and rapport with the students but from other factors. In the present study, no time deficiencies concerning feedback delivery are spotted contrary to other research, which revealed issues concerning lateness of feedback delivery which hinder the feed-forward process (Hounsell, 2003; Price et al., 2010). This can lead to the conclusion that tutor feedback responses are timely enough to facilitate students’ progress. Therefore, ineffectiveness and challenges may be due to other factors such as possibly a general Greek tendency to avoid asking questions.

4.2.5. Preferences regarding the form of feedback: What are students’ preferences with regard to the form of feedback provided? (Research question 5)

In terms of preference (see Table 6 below), students agree⁸ that they prefer signposted comments on the actual assignment apart from the feedback report which shows that, despite the fact that marks and feedback comments are important, it is essential that students be more explicitly guided and directed. Additionally, they agree (m=1.71) that they need suggested answers by the tutors but they neither agree nor disagree (m=2.71) when it comes to correction of every single mistake. They also agree that they need commentary on what they did well in their assignment and they partly agree that they need correction and explanation for every error connected with APA norms. Lastly, no particular preference emerged when they were asked if they want to be encouraged to contact tutors for extra oral feedback, a result which highlights troublesome issues concerning student-tutor communication once again.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferences regarding the form of feedback</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apart from the marking scheme, I’d like signposted comments on my actual assignment</td>
<td>1,54</td>
<td>1,03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Along with having my mistakes traced, I’d like to be given a suggested correct answer by the tutor</td>
<td>1,71</td>
<td>1,09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’d like every single mistake to be corrected</td>
<td>2,71</td>
<td>1,38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’d like to be encouraged more to contact the tutor for extra oral feedback</td>
<td>2,56</td>
<td>1,25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’d like my mistakes connected with APA norms to be explained and corrected one by one</td>
<td>2,01</td>
<td>1,26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’d like the feedback to describe the strong parts of my assignment too</td>
<td>1,59</td>
<td>1,01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. Preferences Regarding the Form of Feedback

Overall, the present study revealed a variety of student preferences regarding the form of feedback. As concerns signposted comments on students’ actual written work, corrections that are to the point and suggested correct answers are well-preferred as pinpointed in other studies too (Huxham, 2007; Walker, 2009; Weaver, 2006). What is surprising once again, though, is that students neither agree nor disagree as to whether they want to be

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⁸ In order to examine preferences, a five-point scale of agreement is used, representing the following levels: 1=Strongly agree, 2=Partly agree, 3=Neither agree or disagree, 4=Partly disagree, 5=Strongly disagree. The mean scores are interpreted on the basis of this scale.
encouraged to contact their tutors for extra oral feedback. This finding may be explained in the following possible ways. First, students may already be urged by their tutors to contact them but they think extra encouragement is unnecessary or they may shy away. Also, they may not think that contact with tutors will aid them in any way. Regardless of what holds true in this case, this finding proves the existence of a gap in student-tutor communication.

5. Concluding remarks

The present study was designed to explore students’ perceptions of tutor assignment feedback in the HOU as a DL institution and revealed important findings.

Despite the fact that feedback is considered effective up to a point, it still involves challenges like vagueness of comments and difficulty interpreting them and cannot cater for the needs of the totality of the students, who expressed preference for more straightforward and custom-made feedback. Additionally, not everybody is or tries to become a strategic user in terms of consultation and constructive use of feedback comments prior to following assignments. Overall, then, tutor assignment feedback will be more effective for the majority of students only when adaptations are made to customize it according to their needs and preferences and if students are better trained on how to process and decode it. Moreover, effectiveness can be better achieved not only by improving the quality of feedback but by building a stronger student-tutor communication for extra oral feedback. Mutual and regular communication should be developed so that students will be able to overcome challenges and troublesome elements feedback comments may entail.

Overall, this study strengthens the idea that as feedback is the main channel that communicates students’ performance and progress, it is imperative that its form is continually adapted to cater for students’ ever-changing needs. It also goes without saying that students need to adopt a more discursive disposition towards their tutors in order to exploit the benefits of constructive communication to the full.

References


Hilgenberg, C. & Tolone, W. (2000). ‘Student perceptions of satisfaction and opportunities for critical thinking in Distance Education by interactive video.’ American Journal of Distance Education, 14/3: 59-73.


White, C. (2005). ‘Contribution of Distance Education to the Development of Individual Learners.’ *Distance Education, 26/2*: 165-181.


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**APPENDIX I**

*The Questionnaire*

1) Which module/s are you currently studying? *required
   1st year: Agg 52  □  2nd year: First elective □
   Agg 53 □  Second elective □
   Both Agg 52 and Agg 53 □  Two electives at the same time □
2) How many written feedback reports have you received this year so far? _____
   *required

**Part A**

*Response to feedback*

Choose the answer that best describes your first reaction

When I receive the tutor’s written feedback: *required
   a) I look at the overall mark first
   b) I look at the marks for each marking criterion first
   c) I read the written comments first
   d) I compare the feedback comments with the assignment
   e) I do all the above one after the other

I focus on: *required
   a) Rationale and Analysis comments more
   b) Use of Literature comments more
   c) Application of Principles to Practice comments more
   d) Organization and Structure comments more
   e) Presentation and Language comments more
   f) All five marking criteria

**Part B**

*Reactions towards the tutor*

After I receive the tutor’s feedback: (all statements are *required fields)

Please rate your answers according to the following: 1 = Always  2 = Often  3 = Sometimes  4 = Rarely  5 = Never

1) I contact the tutor immediately when my mark is not satisfactory
2) I contact the tutor immediately to discuss my performance even if it is satisfactory
3) I contact the tutor only when I do not understand his/her comments
4) I contact the tutor to ask for advice on how to improve my performance
5) I try to understand what went wrong by myself without contacting the tutor
6) I read the comments again the following days and contact the tutor only if I still don’t understand
7) I feel uncomfortable contacting the tutor to ask for explanations

**Part C**

*Reactions towards the next assignment*

Before I start writing the next assignment: (all statements are *required fields)

Please rate your answers according to the following: 1 = Always  2 = Often  3 = Sometimes  4 = Rarely  5 = Never

1) I consult the feedback again
2) I consider the comments one by one and try to avoid the same mistakes in my next assignment
3) I start writing in my own way as feedback comments are not important

Part D
Effectiveness of feedback

The written feedback I receive: (all statements are *required fields)
Please rate your answers according to the following: 1 = Always 2 = Often 3 = Sometimes 4 = Rarely 5 = Never

1) Enhances my understanding of the theory
2) Offers guidance to improve my written academic skills
3) Tries to correct the mistakes in my assignment by directing me to the right parts of the study material
4) Involves enlightening comments that do not create further confusion
5) Encourages me to continue even if my performance was not as I had expected
6) Clearly identifies areas that need improvement
7) Is helpful for me to pass the course

Part E
Troublesome features of feedback

The written feedback I receive: (all statements are *required fields)
Please rate your answers according to the following: 1 = Always 2 = Often 3 = Sometimes 4 = Rarely 5 = Never

1) Seems impersonal making me feel unimportant for the tutor
2) Involves extra personal effort to understand
3) Does not always contribute to the improvement of my next assignment’s grade
4) Comes very close to the submission of the next assignment leaving no room for improvement
5) Comes belated, so I have forgotten the rationale behind my arguments
6) Does not include signposted comments on the problematic parts on the actual assignment
7) Involves vague comments in terms of errors connected with APA norms

Part F
Preferences regarding the form of feedback (all statements are *required fields)
Please rate your answers according to the following: 1 = Strongly agree 2 = Partly agree 3 = Neither agree or disagree 4 = Partly disagree 5 = Strongly disagree

1) Apart from the marking scheme, I’d like signposted comments on my actual assignment
2) Along with having my mistakes traced, I’d like to be given a suggested correct answer by the tutor
3) I’d like every single mistake to be corrected
4) I’d like to be encouraged more to contact the tutor for extra oral feedback
5) I’d like my mistakes connected with APA norms to be explained and corrected one by one
6) I’d like the feedback to describe the strong parts of my assignment too
APPENDIX II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Which module/s are you currently studying?</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agg 52</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agg 53</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>38.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both Agg 52 and Agg 53</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>51.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First elective</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>63.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second elective</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>83.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two electives at the same time</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Numerical distribution of participants in modules

APPENDIX III

Numerical distribution for answers in Part A (Response to feedback)

When I receive the tutor’s feedback:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I look the overall mark first</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>28,6</td>
<td>28,6</td>
<td>28,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>look the marks for each marking criterion first</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3,4</td>
<td>3,4</td>
<td>32,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I read the written comments first</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3,4</td>
<td>3,4</td>
<td>35,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I compare the feedback comments with the assignment</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1,4</td>
<td>1,4</td>
<td>36,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do all the above one after the other</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>63,3</td>
<td>63,3</td>
<td>100,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>100,0</td>
<td>100,0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Students’ response to feedback
I focus on:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Valid</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rational and Analysis comments more</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6,1</td>
<td>6,1</td>
<td>6,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Literature comments more</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.7</td>
<td>.7</td>
<td>6,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application of Principles to Practice comments more</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8,8</td>
<td>8,8</td>
<td>15,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation and Structure comments more</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2,0</td>
<td>2,0</td>
<td>17,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation and Language comments more</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2,0</td>
<td>2,0</td>
<td>19,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All five marking criteria</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>80,3</td>
<td>80,3</td>
<td>100,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>100,0</td>
<td>100,0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Student’s focus on feedback criteria

APPENDIX IV

Numerical distribution for answers in Part D (Effectiveness of feedback)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The written feedback I receive:</th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhances my understanding on theory</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16,3%</td>
<td>29,3%</td>
<td>31,3%</td>
<td>17,7%</td>
<td>5,4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offers guidance to improve my written academic skills</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>41,5%</td>
<td>34,7%</td>
<td>15,0%</td>
<td>6,1%</td>
<td>2,7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tries to correct the mistakes in my assignment by directing me to the right parts of the study material</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25,2%</td>
<td>31,3%</td>
<td>20,4%</td>
<td>14,3%</td>
<td>8,8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involves enlightening comments that do not create further confusion</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21,1%</td>
<td>41,5%</td>
<td>24,5%</td>
<td>10,9%</td>
<td>2,0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Encourages me to continue even if my performance was not as I expected  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>51</th>
<th>34.7%</th>
<th>55</th>
<th>37.4%</th>
<th>25</th>
<th>17.0%</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>8.2%</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>2.7%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clearly identifies areas that require improvement</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>40.1%</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>37.4%</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts as a means of help for me to pass the course</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>29.9%</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Effectiveness of feedback

Georgia Kreonidou (g.kreonidou@gmail.com) is a qualified TEFL teacher working in English language schools since 2005. She holds a B.A. in English Language and Literature from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and an M.Ed. in the Teaching of English as a Second/Foreign Language from the Hellenic Open University.

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The impact of feedback on Distance Education students’ learning process

The expansion of distance education programmes in the international and Greek academic context has led to a shift in focus from teaching to learning, which postulates new roles for tutors. Based on the premise that tutor feedback is more than just the assessment of a written assignment, the present article explores the impact of feedback provided by tutors on the learning process of distance post-graduate students attending the Master's in education (M.Ed.) in The Teaching of English as a Foreign/International Language offered by the Hellenic Open University (HOU). The research involves data collected through a questionnaire as well as samples of tutor feedback given to HOU students of the specific M.Ed. programme. The findings of the study suggest that, although students are pleased with tutor feedback to some extent, some aspects of feedback are in need of improvement. These findings could subsequently contribute to ameliorating the feedback provision scheme currently used by HOU tutors by adapting it to students’ learning needs.

The impact of feedback on Distance Education students’ learning process

Η επίδραση της ανατροφοδότησης στη μαθησιακή διαδικασία στην εξ Αποστάσεως Εκπαίδευση

Valentina PEROUKIDOU & Ifigenia KOFOU

Η επέκταση των προγραμμάτων εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευσης στο διεθνές και ελληνικό ακαδημαϊκό πλαίσιο έχει οδηγήσει σε μετατόπιση της εστίασης από τη διδασκαλία στη μάθηση, η οποία προϋποθέτει νέους ρόλους για τους διδάσκοντες. Με βάση την προϋπόθεση ότι η ανατροφοδότηση του διδάσκοντα είναι κάτι περισσότερο από την αξιολόγηση μιας γραπτής εργασίας, η παρούσα εργασία εξετάζει την επίδραση της ανατροφοδότησης που παρέχεται από τους διδάσκοντες στη διαδικασία της μάθησης των εξ αποστάσεως μεταπτυχιακών φοιτητών που παρακολουθούν το Μεταπτυχιακό Πρόγραμμα στη Διδασκαλία της Αγγλικής ως Ξένης/Διεθνούς Γλώσσας που προσφέρεται από το Ελληνικό Ανοικτό Πανεπιστήμιο (ΕΑΠ). Η έρευνα περιλαμβάνει δεδομένα που συλλέχθηκαν μέσω ερωτηματολογίου, καθώς και δείγματα ανατροφοδότησης διδασκόντων σε φοιτητές του συγκεκριμένου προγράμματος. Τα ευρήματα της έρευνας δείχνουν ότι, αν και οι φοιτητές είναι ικανοποιημένοι με την ανατροφοδότηση του διδάσκοντα σε αρκετά μεγάλο βαθμό, ορισμένες πτυχές της ανατροφοδότησης χρειάζονται βελτίωση. Τα ευρήματα θα μπορούσαν να συμβάλουν στη βελτίωση της παροχής σχολιών
ανατροφοδότησης από τους διδάσκοντες του ΕΑΠ, με την προσαρμογή τους στις μαθησιακές ανάγκες των φοιτητών.

**Key words:** distance education, written assignments, tutor feedback, formative feedback, learning process

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1. **Introduction**

Distance education (DE) has been defined as “a planned and systematic activity that comprises the choice, didactic preparation and presentation of teaching materials as well as the supervision and support of student learning, which is achieved by bridging the physical distance between student and teacher by means of at least one appropriate technical medium” (Delling, 1985, in Keegan, 1996, p. 57). An alternative to conventional education, DE dates back to the 19th century, when the physical distance that separated teachers from their students was compensated for through the use of mail, hence the term ‘correspondence studies’.

In today’s fast-paced world, DE remains highly popular mainly due to the rapid advances of technology as well as for various socio-economic reasons. Letters may have long been substituted for by electronic means of communication; nonetheless the interaction between tutors and learners remains one of the pillars of learner support in DE, especially because of the valuable feedback tutors provide.

So far, research in the field has explored the provision of feedback on a global scale, yet in Greece DE is a rather recent concept, with the Hellenic Open University (HOU) being a pioneer in the field. The aim of the study presented here is to investigate HOU students’ views on tutor feedback regarding their written assignments, and evaluate the feedback provided in terms of its effect on the students’ learning process. To that end, the study explores students’ expectations as regards the feedback they receive, the type of feedback provided and its contribution to students’ performance and autonomy. The data collected by a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire is subsequently juxtaposed to samples of tutors’ qualitative comments.

2. **Feedback in DE**

2.1. **Introductory**

Feedback becomes imperative in DE (Αναστασιάδης & Καρβούνης, 2010), where physical presence is practically non-existent. Deep and meaningful learning has after all been said to occur through the interaction among students, teachers and the learning material (Anderson & Garrison, 1998; Bernard et al., 2014). Tutor feedback plays a vital role in the student-teacher interaction (Hounsell, 2003; Ζήκου & Σπανακά, 2013; Σιούλης & Γαρδικιώτης, 2013), and the comments made may lead to further interaction of students with their material. The modes of interaction in distance education and the place of feedback can be seen in Figure 1 below:
Wiggins (2010, para. 5) defines feedback in an interesting way, as “actionable information, ... empower(ing) the student to make intelligent adjustments when she applies it to her next attempt to perform”, clearly stressing the fact that feedback should, above all, be effective for learners. Especially in the realm of DE, feedback takes on a more powerful status. Lentell (2003) argues that it initiates a dialogue between tutors and learners; a dialogue which constitutes a new form of learner-centred teaching, as supported elsewhere in the literature (cf. Jara & Mellar, 2010; Yang & Carless, 2013). What is more, recent research highlights the importance of “instructor-active participation through scaffolding and timely (formative) feedback” (Joksimović et al., 2015, p. 114).

2.2. Types and styles of formative feedback in DE

In one of the first attempts to map feedback in distance learning, Howard (1987) states that there are four important criteria in designing feedback, namely feedback content, the degree of individualization, the timing, and the feedback format used (p.33).

The content of the feedback provided in DE was initially limited to corrective statements, following the accuracy-based model of writing, which was popular at the time. Teachers’ comments focused on the accuracy of students’ work, providing comments classifying the students’ answers as ‘correct’ or ‘adequate’, taking into account how the students exhibited both declarative (i.e. what to write about) and procedural knowledge (i.e. how to write about it) 2. These comments, albeit vital for students’ understanding of improvement (Wilkinson, 2003), significantly restrict the potential of feedback. However, feedback ideology has changed, as a shift in the writing paradigm has taken place. In more recent models of teaching, where there has been a shift to learner-centredness, various scholars have emphasized the need for cognitive and developmental feedback (O’Rourke, 2003; Wion, 2008). This needs to be detailed, including constructive comments on the students’ writing, not just on the basis of what is right or wrong but guiding students to an enhancement of their performance (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006), thus allowing for writing skills development (Walker, 2009).

The individualization of feedback refers to “the extent to which student performance(s) must be evaluated individually” (Howard, 1987, p. 34). According to the findings of Chung, Shel & Kaiser (2006), individualized feedback can promote self-regulated learning, which requires that the students have in mind some goals to be achieved, against which

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1 All tables and figures have been retrieved from Peroukidou (2017).
2 The concept of declarative/procedural knowledge is further explained in Howard (1987).
performance can be compared and assessed (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006), and encourages them to reflect upon their work, thus scaffolding learning in order to develop further understanding and lead to higher achievement. Individualising feedback also potentially means choosing among multidimensional approaches to assessment, thus creating multiple sources of feedback, which can be drawn upon depending on the learner’s individual style. For example, peer feedback could be made available through the use of Google Docs on a written assignment in a DE environment.

The use of alternative forms of assessment and feedback is claimed to enhance reliability and fairness (Gaytan & McEwen, 2007; Smith, 2007). In this way, feedback functions as a learning tool which helps the learners in their interaction with the material, but at the same time supports them in academic issues, such as using multiple sources for learning, academic writing and so on (Παπαδημητρίου & Λιοναράκης, 2010), aspects of learning that will allow them to become more confident and motivated to continue learning. This kind of support offered by tutors also prevents students from dropping out, a common concern in distance education (Αναστασιάδης & Καρβούνης, 2010).

When it comes to the timing of feedback, various scholars agree that time is of the essence; in other words, feedback needs to be timely (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Sego, 2013) and preferably given ‘immediately following student performance’ (Howard, 1987, p. 34) in order to be beneficial, as delayed feedback may limit its usefulness (Gagne et al., 1993; Sego, 2013; Styer, 2007).

The format of feedback has to do with ‘the delivery method or media used and source’ (Howard, 1987, p. 35). Regarding the delivery method, the most commonly used one is the face-to-face provision of feedback during live seminars or group conferences (Blair & McGinty, 2013; Dowden et al., 2013), such as the contact sessions organized by the HOU. Howard (1987) refers to telephone conferencing and written feedback sent to students via e-mail as also popular methods of feedback delivery, with Lentell (2003) arguing that the availability for contact with tutors also facilitates students’ learning.

With respect to the media used, it is only appropriate that the role of technology is once again acknowledged and stressed, as feedback cannot be immediate “unless delivered through electronic media” (Howard, 1987, p. 36). Pachler et al. (2010) use the term “formative e-assessment” to denote “the use of ICT to support the iterative process of gathering and analyzing information about student learning by teachers as well as learners and of evaluating it in relation to prior achievement and attainment of intended, as well as unintended learning outcomes” (p.716). If this is the case, then “the assessment value of e-mail messages, chat room conversations, and discussion board postings should not be ignored” (Gaytan & McEwen, 2007, p. 129). In fact, the interactivity of the Web and the opportunities it offers for sustained, meaningful interactions and collaboration regarding feedback in DE settings has been emphasized (Gikandi et al., 2011; McIntyre & Wolff, 1998). In terms of style, tutors have the choice of a declarative, reiterative or interrogative style, depending on the aim they wish to achieve (Wion, 2008). Declarative comments put the tutor’s view under the student’s consideration, and allow for dialogue, on condition that a trusting relationship has been established between participants. When using the reiterative style, the tutor reflects on or repeats the student’s content, reformulating it ‘in order to reflect on a skill or an attitude’ (Wion, 2008, p. 2). Finally, the interrogative style relates to the tutor asking a question regarding the student’s point of view, be it in a direct or an indirect way (see also Karagianni, present volume, for a discussion).
The present study was conducted on the basis of the axis of what Howard (1987) defined as the basic characteristics of tutor feedback in DE, as well as of one of the authors’ personal experience as a HOU student.

3. Research methodology

3.1. The research objectives

The study presented in this article aimed at exploring tutor feedback and its impact on the learning process and progress of post-graduate students attending the Master's in education (M.Ed.) in The Teaching of English as a Foreign/International Language offered by the Hellenic Open University. Students’ attitudes towards tutor feedback as well as data from actual tutor feedback were analyzed, in an attempt to evaluate the feedback provision scheme. More specifically, the following research questions were posed:

1. What are HOU students’ expectations as regards the feedback they receive?
2. What is the type and content of feedback provided by tutors to HOU students regarding their written assignments?
3. Do students find the feedback useful? If so, how does it assist the learning process?
4. What needs to be done in order for student performance to improve over time?

3.2. The participants

A hundred and four (104) students/graduates of the specific HOU M.Ed. programme participated in the study by completing a questionnaire which was distributed via e-mail. The respondents ranged between 21-60 years of age, but were mostly in their thirties (51.9%). Regarding their educational background, the vast majority were either in the process of acquiring a Master’s degree (69.2%) or already held one (22.1%). The number of participants was equally balanced between the state and the private sector, while a small number were unemployed at the time. Moreover, three HOU tutors\(^3\) kindly contributed by providing samples of feedback given to HOU students, which offered qualitative data supplementing the data obtained from the questionnaire.

3.3. The research instruments

The study presented in this article was conducted in November-December 2016. The research instruments used included a questionnaire\(^4\), which was administered to HOU students, and a checklist (Appendix I), which was used to group the qualitative data collected through the tutor feedback samples. The creation of the checklist as a second research instrument served as a way of ‘discovering concepts and relationships in raw data and then organizing these into a theoretical explanatory scheme’ (Straus & Corbin, 1998, p.11).

\(^3\) The HOU tutors who contributed the data used in this dissertation are Dr. Ifigenia Kofou, who teaches the elective module Assessment in English language teaching, Dr. Athanasios Karasimos, who teaches the elective module Educational technology in English language teaching, and Dr. Vassilios Zorbas, who teaches the compulsory module Course design, implementation and evaluation in English language teaching.

\(^4\) The questionnaire can be found at https://goo.gl/forms/tHtWxdEzIvtua4f1.
The questionnaire consisted of 55 5-point Likert scale (1=totally agree, 5=totally disagree) questions. The first part (Part I) collected demographic data about the respondents. The second Part (Part II) sought to elicit students’ expectations regarding tutor feedback (research question 1), in relation to its type and content, as well as its timing and mode of delivery. The third part of the questionnaire (Part III) dealt with the evaluation of the actual tutor feedback the students receive on their written assignments, which is why the questions were basically concerned with the same aspects of feedback as the previous part. The final part of the questionnaire (Part IV) set out to evaluate feedback usefulness in relation to students’ learning. In other words, the questions investigated which areas related to learning (e.g. cognitive, affective or motivational) were assisted or possibly hindered through tutor feedback (research question 3). The questionnaire was piloted before its distribution and checked for reliability after the answers had been collected (Cronbach’s α=0.826).

The checklist (see Appendix I, p.21) included ten items related to the mode of feedback delivery, the presentation, content and usefulness of the feedback provided for students’ assignments in the last three years. It was expected that the checklist might guide tutors into reconsidering the feedback they provide their students with.

### 3.4. Limitations

Regardless of how well-organized a study may be, there are always some limitations. The present study featured educational records in the form of feedback reports students were sent by their tutors. However, the tutors all used the same assessment rubric, provided by the HOU. That is to say, there was no control student group who had received different kind of feedback in order to enable us to measure the effectiveness of the provided feedback in more detail. Needless to say, the sample was very small, as the obtained records followed the progress of three groups of students through three academic years. Last but certainly not least, the absence of more open-ended items in the questionnaires for sake of convenience, may have deprived us of enlightening insights into HOU students’ beliefs about tutor feedback.

### 4. The findings

#### 4.1. HOU students’ expectations and evaluation of feedback

With regard to the students’ feedback expectations and preferences, it appears that students strongly believe in the teaching potential of feedback. As shown in Table 1 below, the majority of students would like feedback to guide them towards better academic skills, providing information which can be used in future assignments. At the same time, they seek to be assessed on the basis of higher-level criteria, such as theoretical and conceptual understanding of the teaching material. One of the most interesting findings is that 97 out of the 104 respondents stressed the importance of in-text tutor comments, following the claim made by various scholars in favour of personalized comments on the student’s work provided by the tutor (Howard, 1987; Mason, 2003; Ypsilandis, 2002 among others). Moreover, students enjoy being praised for their achievements (76%) and want to receive a detailed account of their mistakes, which they prefer to see corrected. Perhaps this need for detailed correction explains the stated preference for receiving tutor feedback online rather than in a face-to-face context, since online platforms allow for the attachment of various files, links to other material and so on.
I would like tutor feedback to... | Percentage of positive responses $^5$
---|---
1. guide me towards better academic writing skills. | 97.1%
2. provide information that I will be able to use in future assignments. | 96.1%
3. explain the tutor’s mark. | 94.3%
4. focus on higher-level assessment criteria. | 94.2%
5. I would like signposted, in-text comments on my assignment. | 93.3%
6. assess whether I have understood the reading material relevant to the assignment. | 90.4%
7. give me a detailed account of my mistakes. | 88.5%
8. suggest correct answers for my mistakes. | 87.5%
9. be delivered online. | 85.6%
10. provide opportunities for reflection on my learning. | 84.6%
11. suggest further reading materials in order to assist learning. | 81.7%
12. praise my achievements. | 76%

Table 1. Students’ preferences regarding tutor feedback

When asked to evaluate the tutors’ feedback, the respondents expressed mostly positive views regarding the comments they received. The most significant findings, presented in Figure 2 below, show that students stated that the written tutor feedback on their assignments included comments both regarding higher-level goals (conceptual understanding, application of theory to practice and so on -- 84.7%) and lower-level ones (language use, presentation and so on -- 76.9%). This contradicts recent studies which claim that HOU students are not provided with “high quality, formative and targeted feedback” (Σιούλης & Γαρδικιώτης, 2013, p. 225), but are instead given some comments to accompany their mark. The respondents also stated that the feedback received was mainly positive, explained the mark they were assigned and included detailed personalized comments, thus providing motivation regardless of their performance, confirming Weaver (2006), who maintained that tutors should provide guidance and motivation rather than merely diagnosing problems.

The written feedback provided by HOU tutors...

Figure 2. Students’ evaluation of tutor feedback.

$^5$ The sum total of 1 (totally agree) and 2 (agree) on the Likert scale.
With regard to the usefulness of the feedback they receive (see Figure 3 below), it was generally evaluated as a helpful learning tool. Respondents stressed its positive effect on them as learners and almost 70% stated that tutor feedback provides encouragement, regardless of their performance. 75% of the respondents stated that the feedback they receive arrives on time and concerns generic issues (e.g. academic writing/study skills). Another significant finding has to do with the content of the feedback provided. 74 out of 104 respondents felt that the feedback they receive assists the development of academic writing skills and that the explanation of their mistakes improves their performance either by identifying problematic areas in their studying or by suggesting specific improvements for their assignments:

![Figure 3. Students' evaluation of feedback usefulness in relation to learning.](image)

As to how exactly tutor feedback assists learning, it can be seen in Figure 4 below that almost two thirds of the students surveyed believe that the feedback received does in fact encourage self-directed learning (64.4%) and more organized methods of study (62.5%), thus leading to learner autonomy. In general, this means that students will eventually be able to assume responsibility over the content, pace and effectiveness of their own learning (Bernard et al., 2014; Schmid et al., 2014; Torrisi-Steele & Drew, 2013). Moreover, more
than half feel that their metacognitive skills are boosted and that deeper scientific research is encouraged. Apart from that, some of the respondents seem to view feedback as a means to promoting the pursuit of further academic goals, such as the publication of their work or the continuation of their studies beyond the post-graduate level. Surprisingly enough, only a small minority seems to believe that tutor feedback fosters teamwork (9.6%) or pairwork (8.7%), although in our experience HOU tutors do encourage collaboration among students.

Figure 4. Students’ views on how tutor feedback further supports learning

It therefore appears that the feedback HOU students receive is positive and timely and largely fosters higher-order skills and self-regulated learning.

4.2. The tutor feedback samples

The analysis of the tutor feedback samples (see Figure 5 below) produced some rather controversial results. Although some of the features, such as the online delivery and the positive comments on students’ achievements, match the students’ expectations, less than half of the 204 samples checked actually included in-text comments. Instead, the students were provided with a general report without a concrete account of their mistakes. Lastly, suggestions for further reading material were made in less than 10% of the cases. This revealed either that the students may have been impressionistic in their responses or that the tutors may be using the standard feedback provision scheme in different ways, not always making full use of its potential.
In addition to the above considerations, it should be noted that the comments accompanying the feedback reports were written in declarative and reiterative style when they were intended to illustrate an example or explain a point, whereas the interrogative style was used to make a suggestion or prompt students to reflect on their writing. The reports also included comments which showed the progress of most students. Comments like “The assignment shows great improvement!” and “The assignment fulfills expectations as it fully and coherently analyses the main issues” provide further evidence that the students’ performance did in fact improve over time with the provision of tutor feedback. Of course, the improvement noted could be attributed to other factors as well, such as deeper understanding of the subject matter or writing practice.

In an attempt to sum up the findings of the study, Figure 6 juxtaposes the students’ expectations regarding useful features of tutor feedback and the existence of these features in the samples examined.

From the table it is evident that the feedback tutors provide matches students’ perceptions to a great extent. However, it needs to suggest further reading and correct answers and guide students towards academic writing skills in order to support learning further. Importantly, tutors also need to make sure their feedback includes in-text comments.
4. Discussion

The questionnaire results presented above show that students’ expectations are in fact largely fulfilled. The tutor feedback is timely, which makes it more useful (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Ramsden, 2003). It is provided via e-mail or uploaded on the Moodle platform, which allows for its enrichment through the attachment of various files and useful links. This is documented though the use of the files shared through the Yahoo groups created for each programme module.

Following the description of feedback in section 2.2 above, several points can be made. As regards the type and style of the feedback provided, we seem to have both corrective feedback related to academic skills and the presentation of students’ assignments (Wilkinson, 2003) and developmental, content-related feedback, which provides constructive criticism and supports higher-order thinking skills development (Curry, 2006; O’Rourke, 2003). The tutors’ feedback is personalized in most cases, as documented through the students’ responses and confirmed by the examination of the tutor feedback samples. Feedback comments come in a variety of styles, depending on the purpose they serve (Wion, 2008). For instance, they are interrogative when they need to elicit the students’ reflections and reiterative to denote the existence of errors in need of immediate correction. This individualization seems to motivate learners and assist self-regulated learning. As a result, the majority of the students view the feedback they receive as quite effective and as enabling them to improve their performance over time.

Yet, despite the students’ preference for in-text tutor comments on the body of the assignments, these are not always present, as some of the samples examined consisted only of a feedback report. Furthermore, alternative forms of feedback, such as self-tests or peer-generated feedback, are not usually employed and the collaboration that could make feedback more learner-centred through the use of ICT is largely neglected. The fact that the
online tools and platforms offered by the HOU have not been fully utilized either by HOU tutors or by students might be due to their perceptions and beliefs about DE; for instance, they may believe that the tutor- student and student-student interaction during contact sessions is sufficient. Another reason might be the low level of ICT competence, which would hinder such online interactions.

As a general suggestion originating from this study, it can be noted that tutor feedback needs to become more process-based, which will allow for systematic monitoring of the learning process of each individual student. This could be achieved, for instance, if students are given the opportunity to respond to tutor feedback through the use of technology. Additionally, the more meticulous provision of comments on the part of the tutors will disperse some students’ concerns about feedback not being of assistance in applying theory to practice or in developing academic skills. Setting up an introductory module focusing on the development of academic as well as ICT skills would help minimize related tutor comments and help tutors focus on less technical issues.

Students may also need to be included in the feedback provision process more actively. Technological tools should be used to increase interactivity (Ypsilantis, 2002) and collaboration among students for interpersonal scaffolding (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). After all, respondents expressed their positive attitude towards collaborative learning and alternative forms of feedback provision. One way to achieve this is through the organization of asynchronous, group discussions online using computer mediated communication (CMC) or asynchronous learning networks (ALNs), as suggested in Darabi et al. (2013). If these discussions are organized in a purposeful way, including the provision of feedback both by tutors and peer students, then learning will be better supported. Furthermore, tutors could post links to further reading material or share good writing practices with their students, creating an online database for future HOU students, as well. The introduction of self-controls, quizzes or checklists would also prompt reflection on one’s learning and self-assessment. Finally, this “synergy” of media and pedagogy could be achieved through the introduction of open educational resources (OER) and mobile devices in DE. Learners will thus become “pro-sumers” instead of consumers of knowledge and will actively be involved in its co-creation, as Jahnke & Norberg (2013) argue in their discussion of Digital Didactics. Since DE students rely on technology and the majority of the surveyed student population said they would welcome their inclusion in the feedback provision scheme, we feel this would be an additional step to the improvement of their performance over time.

5. Conclusions

This article presented the findings of a study which dealt with the issue of feedback in DE, focusing on the case of the Hellenic Open University. The study attempted to combine the students’ views on tutor feedback with an evaluation of tutor feedback features in the hope that this ‘sycretism’ will lead to some useful practical considerations regarding the feedback provision framework in the HOU. Despite their limitations, our findings point to the degree to which DE students count on tutor feedback and hint at the potential of tutor feedback as a means of improving student performance.

Finally, further research could be conducted and explore tutors’ views, too, while the use of interviews with open-ended questions might enlighten us further and also validate quantitative findings. A longitudinal study, examining the performance of a number of students over the course of the programme, would demonstrate the link between feedback and learning more clearly.
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Appendix I

This is the checklist used to group the findings of the tutor feedback samples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The tutor feedback sample examined...</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>To a certain extent</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. is sent online.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. explains the tutor’s mark.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. praises the student’s achievements in certain areas.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. is limited to comments on low-level goals (e.g. style/language/presentation).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. focuses on high-level assessment criteria (e.g. theoretical/conceptual understanding).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. includes a detailed account of the student’s mistakes.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. includes signposted, in-text comments on the assignment.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. suggests correct answers for mistakes.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. provides guidance towards better academic skills.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. includes information that can be used in future assignments.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. suggests further reading materials.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Students’ perceptions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of written feedback in distance learning: The case of the TESOL M.Ed. of the HOU

While the role of written feedback in the learning cycle is fundamental, there is relatively little research focusing on students’ perceptions on the issue. What is more, this topic is even more under-researched in post-graduate, as well as in distance education, with the Greek context being no exception to this rule. This research was therefore designed with the aim of investigating the perceptions of the students enrolled in the TESOL M.Ed. of the Hellenic Open University (HOU) as regards the written feedback they receive on their assignments. The research entailed five interviews with senior students attending the TESOL M.Ed. The interviews revolved around four research questions, namely feedback effectiveness, strengths of written feedback, weaknesses of written feedback and, finally, proposals for amendments. The student responses on the first three research questions are quite enlightening and, in most cases, consistent with related research on the issue, while their proposals for amendments may serve as an insightful basis for the improvement of the written feedback provided in the programme and, perhaps, in distance learning programmes generally.

Eleni TRIGONAKI

Αν και ο ρόλος της γραπτής ανατροφοδότησης στον κύκλο της μάθησης είναι πρωταρχικός, η έρευνα που εστιάζει στις αντιλήψεις των φοιτητών πάνω στο θέμα αυτό είναι περιορισμένη. Επιπλέον, το θέμα αυτό δεν έχει ερευνηθεί επαρκώς στη μεταπτυχιακή, αλλά όταν και στην εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση, μη εξαιρουμένης και της ελληνικής πραγματικότητας. Η παρούσα έρευνα σχεδιάστηκε λοιπόν με σκοπό να διερευνηθούν οι αντιλήψεις των φοιτητών που φοιτούν στο Μεταπτυχιακό Πρόγραμμα Σπουδών «Μεταπτυχιακή Ειδίκευση Καθηγητών Αγγλικής Γλώσσας» του Ελληνικού Ανοικτού Πανεπιστημίου (ΕΑΠ) σχετικά με τη γραπτή ανατροφοδότηση που λαμβάνουν για τις εργασίες τους. Η έρευνα
periełambane pénte syneventeúzes me prochorhroménuvos foititêz ton Prográmmatos. Oi syneventeúxes eîchan ws basikî áxona têsseusa erënuhtikà erwítîmata, kai, syngkëkriménâ, tin apotelësmatikê anatrophodôsth, ta dunata sîmeia tês graiptîs anatrophodôsth, ta adûnâma sîmeia tês graiptîs anatrophodôsth kai télos, protásèzes gia véltisw. Oi apanthíseis twn foititôn sta tría prîta erwítîmata einai diáforoustitikès kai stis perissósteres peripítôseis sunáðoun me tin sychikî biblîografía, enoi oi protásèses toun gia allagês filodóxoun na apotelêson tw tâsh gia tê véltisw tês graiptîs anatrophodôsth pou parêcheta sto Metapwtûzhikò autò Prógrámmma, kai, isw, kai se allà ex apotásewes Prográmmata genvikà.

Key words: distance learning, HOU, written feedback, students’ perceptions

1. Introduction

The role of feedback in the learning cycle is fundamental. The literature highlighting its centrality and significance for student learning, reflection and development is abundant (e.g. Carless, 2006). Still, while tutors’ perceptions of written feedback have been widely explored (e.g. Topping, 2010), there is considerably less work focusing on students’ views and perceptions on the issue (e.g. Evans, 2013). The topic of written feedback is even more under-researched in post-graduate, as well as in distance education, with the Greek context being no exception to this rule. Increasing reports of student dissatisfaction with the written feedback they receive and a general shift towards a more student-centred approach in education call for research that explores students’ experiences, perspectives and preferences on the issue in depth.

The present study has therefore been designed to explore the perspectives of students attending the Master’s in Education (M.Ed.) in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) of the Hellenic Open University (HOU), with regard to the strengths and weaknesses of written feedback provided on their assignments. The main issues to be explored were four: what constitutes effective feedback, what its strengths are, what its weaknesses and what amendments can enhance and improve the process of providing written feedback in the programme and, perhaps, in distance learning generally.

The article is laid out as follows: First, the conceptual framework around which the present research revolves is established. The presentation of the research design follows and the research findings are presented and discussed next. The article concludes with the implications, the limitations of the study and suggestions for further research.

2. Literature review and conceptual framework

2.1. Distance learning

The advent of distance learning (DL) has questioned the presupposition that learning typically involves face-to-face interaction between an instructor and learners, while all pedagogical practices occur in real classrooms (Allen et al., 2004). In distance education (DE), communication between the teacher and the students is technologically supported and mediated, since they are not physically co-present in the same
location and can also be separated in time (Moore et al., 2011). In other words, their communication can be asynchronous (Allen et al., 2004).

DL is characterized by a plethora of print or media tools that facilitate interaction and learning among those involved. A significant advantage of DL is that it can meet the needs of quite a diverse and broad population (Valentine, 2002). It provides access to learning to people who are geographically remote, while at the same time it can serve large numbers of people due to its flexible nature (Moore et al., 2011). Naturally, DE addresses mostly adult learners, since they need this flexibility offered by DL institutions more often (Lionarakis, 2008).

Nonetheless, DE can have some drawbacks, apart from its numerous advantages. First of all, studying at a distance can be quite an isolating experience, or as Eastmond (1995, p. 46) eloquently put it, there is “the loneliness of the long distance learner”. The lack of physical contact with the instructor and peers can create feelings of distance, detachment or even uncertainty, thus complicating a student’s course of studying or obstructing their full academic integration (Patriarcheas & Xenos, 2008). Moreover, this communication and psychological gap between tutors and learners further affects the process of providing feedback, with students quite often displaying dissatisfaction over the quality or amount of feedback they receive, thus necessitating more research on the matter.

2.2. Distance learning in Greece

DL in Greece is a relatively recent educational field. Nonetheless, due to its clear advantages and the flexibility it offers, it has quickly become quite popular and has been rapidly growing. Besides the HOU, there are no other ‘whole system control model’ institutions running in the country. However, the approach generally followed in the HOU is a ‘combined’ or ‘blended’ learning one. More specifically, there are some face-to-face meetings of the students with the instructor along with DL synchronous and asynchronous methodology, such as phone sessions or e-mails respectively (Patriarcheas & Xenos, 2008). Overall, the HOU is generally considered a successful tertiary education institution in Greece (Koziori, 2011).

The written assignments in such a DL context are really significant, because they are practically the only way for a student to show and apply what they have learnt. Equally important is the feedback provided by the tutors, as a lot of studies have shown (e.g. Hounsell et al., 2008; Koustitourakis et al., 2008). In the case of the TESOL program, feedback on assignments is given through a standardized feedback form, like the one displayed in Appendix I. Through this rubric, with the specific pre-defined assessment criteria, tutors assess assignments by means of both grades and comments.

2.3. Feedback

As already mentioned above, feedback is central in any learning process (Weaver, 2006). Feedback can be defined in two contrasting ways. On the one hand, it may be considered an end product, a one-way communication from teachers to students, a consequence of a performance, based on a teacher-centred approach (e.g. Chokwe, 2015). It should be noted that this transmission model is traditionally favored in higher education. On the other hand, the paradigm shift towards a more student-centred approach to learning has also affected the way feedback is viewed, towards a more dialogic and open-ended process (Brown, 2007). Other scholars opt for broader and more general definitions of feedback, stressing its importance in student learning. Carless (2006, p. 219), for instance, characterizes feedback as a "key characteristic of quality teaching".
There are several reasons why feedback occupies such a prominent position in educational literature. First of all, it can help improve students’ behaviour, thus enabling them to meet their own objectives and advance (Adcroft, 2011). Moreover, according to Weaver (2006), it can motivate students to improve both their present and their future performance, while it also stresses their strengths and weaknesses, providing them with a reader’s perspective on their written work (Hyland, 2013a). Feedback also creates opportunities for dialogue between the teacher and the student (Beaumont et al., 2011). Finally, it promotes reflection and self-regulation, thus contributing to distance learners’ autonomy (Espasa & Meneses, 2009).

With regard to the issue of feedback effectiveness, although some experts contend that what exactly constitutes effective feedback is debatable and cannot be accurately defined (e.g. Evans & Waring, 2011), some lists with conditions or principles of good feedback practice have been compiled over the years, such as the one by Gibbs & Simpson (2005), in which they describe certain conditions under which feedback can affect student learning more effectively. Similarly, Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006) propose some principles of good feedback practice, based on self-regulated learning.

Written feedback specifically is considered the most popular method through which teachers interact with students. While it is such an indispensable part of the teaching and learning cycle in tertiary education (Adcroft, 2011), however, it is a quite complicated mechanism, and may have both strong and weak points. It should be noted that, besides certain straightforward aspects of written feedback that can be easily labelled as strengths or weaknesses, such as the facilitation of learning and grades respectively, most related issues are quite controversial and can be either, depending on the context. Below, a list of such feedback properties, which will also form the basis of the research presented in Section 3, is provided.

**2.4. Strengths and Weaknesses of Written feedback**

Among the strengths of written feedback, we could accommodate the following:

- **It facilitates learning and skills**

Written feedback can enhance the learning experience, as well as students’ reflection ability (Agius & Wilkinson, 2014). Moreover, due to its heavy informational load and its permanent nature and long-lasting effect, as students can utilize written feedback for future reference, it can help develop students’ metacognitive awareness (Calfoglou et al., 2011).

- **It is individualized**

Another advantage of written feedback confirmed in a lot of studies is the individualized attention it can offer students, in contrast to the classroom context, where this is rarely possible (e.g. Dowden & Allen, 2013).

- **Praises**

Praises are generally welcomed by students, who claim that they can encourage them to improve and learn, by affecting their self-esteem, motivation and performance positively (Lipnevich & Smith, 2009). Still, instructors should be cautious of providing too many praises in their feedback, since it has been
found that they can detract from performance, in a sense that excessive attention to the self “robs cognitive resources that would otherwise be committed to the task” (ibid., 2009, p. 350).

There are also written feedback-related features, however, which could be treated as either positive or negative, as either strengths or weaknesses:

- **Emphasis on content, detail, specificity and clarity**

Written feedback can be of maximum utility if it is detailed, with a lot of examples or anecdotes throughout the assignment, with more emphasis paid to the content of the paper (Ghazal et al., 2014). At the same time, the comments should be focused, specific and clear (e.g. Calfoglou et al., 2011).

On the other hand, several researchers report that teachers are mostly inclined to correct technical items and surface features of the language, such as grammar and spelling, a practice that is generally considered ineffective, since it does not promote lifelong learning or feeding forward, especially in DE (e.g. Glover & Brown, 2006). Furthermore, students often complain that written comments are too general, vague or ambiguous and, therefore, ineffective (Nicol, 2010).

- **Interaction between tutor and students**

Written feedback can provide opportunities for interaction between a tutor and a student. Feedback is considered dialogical if it involves active learner engagement. Especially in DE, it is really important to invite the student’s involvement, since feedback is one of the few opportunities for interaction, or, in some cases, the only one (Chokwe, 2015). Therefore, it is ideally a two-way process, with tutors providing comments and suggestions for improvement and students using those comments to improve (Dowden et al., 2013).

However, despite the above socio-constructivist view, which situates the student at the centre of the learning process and underscores the significance of interaction (Askew & Lodge, 2000), it is still evident in a lot of higher education institutions that written feedback is monological, a mere transmission of information from the teacher to the students (Blair, Curtis & McGinty, 2013). Weaver (2006) supports that summative assessment is a significant reason for this one-way, transmission mode of written feedback.

- **Students’ emotions**

The process of receiving feedback is quite emotional for students, since they invest time and effort and engage personally (Higgins et al., 2001). In some studies, students generally express positive feelings towards written feedback because they believe it helps them improve and learn. They also claim that it motivates them, encourages them and reduces their anxiety (e.g. Beaumont et al., 2008).

Notwithstanding this, it is argued that students quite often perceive tutors’ comments as personal judgments or even attacks, especially when feedback is negative or when they have low self-esteem (Burksaitiene, 2012). As a result, they experience quite negative feelings, such as disappointment or anger, and ultimately become unreceptive to tutor comments (Mahfoodh, 2016).
- **Time**

Time can be seen in two different ways. First, there is the time that it takes to receive official feedback after the completion of an assignment. The importance of prompt and timely feedback is stressed in numerous studies (e.g. Li & De Luca, 2014). Prompt feedback contributes to student satisfaction and is relevant and useful, since it allows for sufficient time to process it and then move to the next assignment (Hyland, 2013b). Timely feedback is even more significant in DL, where students lack the opportunity of frequent contact with their tutor and peers. Secondly, in a broader sense, time is also the moment when students receive feedback on an assignment, for instance before starting writing, during or after its completion. The former could be in the form of guidelines that precede an assignment and is particularly important, since it helps students meet the expectations and standards set by tutors. Moreover, guidelines facilitate instructors' evaluation of students' performance (Khowaja & Gul, 2014). Still, once again, the issue of time can also be a challenge. In most research in which the timing of feedback is involved, many students complain of delayed feedback (e.g. Khowaja & Gul, 2014). When feedback is not timely, it loses its effectiveness and is practically impossible to use in subsequent work, thus acquiring only a summative role (Hounsell et al., 2008).

- **Rubric with assessment criteria**

As stated above, assessment in the TESOL M.Ed. is provided in a feedback form involving a rubric with standardized assessment criteria (see Appendix I). Written feedback of this form is heavily advocated in the relevant literature, as it can help students clarify the goals of an assignment (Ghazal et al., 2014), understand their mark and comments and increase their motivation to read the comments carefully and improve (Ecclestone, 2007). It also provides a minimum consistency of marking between different markers and modules, by helping tutors remain focused on the specific goals of a particular assignment (Agius & Wilkinson, 2014).

Nonetheless, the issue of rubrics has also received some criticism. Feedback forms are believed to be "leading to routinisation in the provision of (written) feedback" (Bailey, 2009, p. 12). Students complain that the comments in the rubrics sometimes look irritatingly alike, or that there is not always congruency between the criteria, the comments and the marks (Khowaja & Gul, 2014).

Among the main weaknesses of written feedback, we could list the following:

- **Grades**

Grades, a predominant issue in assessment literature, are generally documented as an obstacle to quality feedback, as well as to motivation for learning (e.g. Holmes & Papageorgiou, 2009). Students themselves admit that, when they receive grades along with comments, they primarily care about the grades. Finally, by engaging the ego, grades can affect students’ self-esteem negatively (Tuck, 2012).

- **Inconsistency**

Last but not least, a final weakness reported in several papers is the lack of consistency in the provision of written feedback, even among members of faculty on the same programme and module (e.g. Carless et al., 2011). In Ghazal's (2014) and Hyland's (2013b) research, students clearly identified this issue and stressed the fact that feedback varied in terms of quality, quantity, effectiveness and focus.
3. Research Design

3.1. Method and sample

As already mentioned in the introduction, the main aim of this research is to explore the perceptions of the students in the M.Ed. in TESOL of the HOU as regards the strengths and weaknesses of the written feedback they receive on their assignments. More specifically, the following four research questions constitute the focus of the present study:

• What constitutes effective written feedback for the students of the M.Ed. in TESOL?
• What are the strengths of the written feedback provided on assignments from the students’ perspective?
• What are the main weaknesses of written feedback from the students’ perspective?
• What possible changes or improvements need to be made in order for the written feedback provided to be more effective?

A qualitative data collection method, that of interviews, was followed, since it can facilitate the gathering of rich data that would help gain deep and detailed understanding of the students’ perceptions (Beaumont et al., 2008; 2011). Another reason for adopting a qualitative method was the fact that most studies concerning students’ perceptions on assessment and feedback are quantitative in nature, which also created the need for a different approach (Struyven, Dochy and Janssens, 2005). It was generally felt that students’ perceptions and views are too sophisticated to be ‘restricted’ by a quantitative method (Silverman, 2013).

The sample of the present research, which was chosen for reasons of availability and accessibility and could thus be characterized as convenient (Schlegelmilch, Love & Diamantopoulos, 1997), consists of five senior female students, enrolled in the M.Ed. in TESOL of the HOU. For reasons of confidentiality and anonymity, numbers will be used for reference to a specific student, like, for instance, Student 1 (S1), Student 2 (S2) and so on. In line with other studies concerning written feedback which follow qualitative methods (e.g. Hyland, 2013a), the number of participants is relatively small. Generally, in qualitative research it is often recommended that a small sample size is preferable so as to be able to manage the "many hundreds of bites of information from each unit of data collection" (Ritchie et al., 2013, p. 117).

3.2. Instruments and procedure

The interviews conducted were semi-structured, since the aim was “to reconstruct the interviewee's subjective theory about the issue under study” (Flick, 2009, p. 156). There were eleven initial open-ended questions about written feedback, provided in Appendix II below, while further probes were used whenever there was the need to elicit fuller responses. The first two questions, asking about feedback effectiveness and its written form respectively, are more general, leaving interviewees room to express their views without being confined within the interviewer’s “frame of reference” (Flick, 2009, p. 151). The remaining eight questions were specifically targeted at the strengths and weaknesses we discussed in the previous section. The final question concerned suggestions for improvement. The aim was to have an exploratory discussion in which the students would reflect on their experiences and would freely express their views on the issue under discussion. Using these initial questions helped to remain focused.
on all the key points to be discussed, without, however, limiting the participants’ responses (Hopf, 2000).

All interviews were conducted via the telephone due to distance limitations. They were recorded and were afterwards transcribed verbatim for the purposes of the analysis, using the transcription conventions by Drew (1995, p. 78, in Flick, 2009, p. 300). Special attention was paid to the thematizing and coding of the data, which was performed manually, since it can be a quite challenging task (Spencer et al., 2003).

4. Presentation and discussion of the research findings

4.1. Effective written feedback parameters

As expected, all students referred to the central role of feedback in their progress and development (Question No. 1). S3 commented: *Eh I think it is effective and eh quite helpful because it provides us with all the information about my performance and eh also shows me my strong points and helps me improve my weak points.* This view is widely reflected in the relevant literature. For instance, Adcroft (2011) refers to the influence of feedback in students’ improvement and progress. Moreover, Hyland (2013a) also maintains that feedback informs students on their strengths and weaknesses.

Moreover, two students showed their preference for formative feedback. More specifically, S2 referred to feedback that helps her achieve a future improvement, while S4 stressed the importance of ongoing feedback. S4 clearly favours formative, ongoing feedback over summative, more judgmental one. The latter has often been criticized by experts for its ‘end-loaded’ character (e.g. Hounsell, 2007), while formative feedback is considered helpful since it ‘feeds forward’ to future work and aims at improving students’ subsequent performance (Shute, 2008).

The students were also asked about the significance of written feedback specifically (Question No. 2). Most interviewees referred to the nature of written feedback and highlighted the fact that written comments are permanent and ‘official’. For instance, S4 replied: *I think that eh written feedback is more valid, more powerful. It can have more lasting effects on the person who is reading it.*

4.2. Strengths and weaknesses of written feedback

On the positive and negative properties of written feedback, the students’ opinions are presented right below:

- **It facilitates learning and skills**

The students clearly acknowledge the significance of written feedback in the facilitation of learning and skills, as already explained in 4.1 above. As S2 commented: *Eh feedback influences our learning and achievement. At the same time assists us to meet our goals and learning.*

- **It is individualized**

Most of the interviewees seem to believe that written feedback is personal, individualized and focused. Most characteristically, S1 said that effective feedback *has some general characteristics, and eh then has*
some more specific characteristics that concerns that concern me. Their opinion agrees with most research on the issue, which underlines the individualized attention offered to students through written feedback (e.g. Hyland, 2013b).

- Praises

All five students were very positive regarding the use of praise in the feedback they receive (Question No. 3). They highlighted the fact that praises are very important mostly for psychological reasons, since they motivate and encourage learners to go on and improve. S1 said: *Praises are always important even if they are six or a hundred and six. So I want praises, I want somebody to tell me you’ve done nice work.* This view is confirmed by other studies in which students also report that praises affect their performance and self-esteem positively (e.g. Mahfoodh, 2016). Conversely, although in some studies tutors are cautioned against including too many praises in their feedback because they can detract from performance (e.g. Getzlaf et al., 2009), the students in this research did not generally agree that an excess of praises as against other, more substantial, comments is negative or harmful.

- Emphasis on content, detail, specificity and clarity

The next two questions examined the issues of clarity and content of feedback respectively (Questions No. 4 and 5). As regards the issue of clarity, the students were divided in their opinions. Students 1 and 2 generally felt that the feedback they received was ambiguous or too general. Similar complaints are documented in a lot of papers, in which students believe that vague and general feedback is ineffective and unhelpful (e.g. Nicol, 2010).

By contrast, the rest of the students did not report any particular problems regarding the clarity of feedback. *Eh especially when the tutors were quite analytic, and explained the the points they eh mentioned thoroughly, then feedback was really helpful. I wanted to be able to understand what they needed from me, so as to improve, to get better for the next assignment* (S5). Focused and analytical feedback is also advocated in Poulos & Mahony (2008), while other researchers focus more on the clarity of the comments (e.g. Calfoglou et al., 2011).

Unlike the issue of clarity, the students had quite similar views as regards the content of feedback. More specifically, they stressed that feedback should focus on the content of the assignment instead of the surface features of language. The same view is supported in a lot of studies, in which it is argued that the emphasis of written feedback should be on the content of an assignment (e.g. Ghazal et al., 2014). Still, it is common practice among teachers to focus more on the technical aspects of an assignment (e.g. Karagianni, present volume, Stern & Solomon, 2006). The data from the interviews indicate that students are in favour of ‘content-focused’ feedback. As S2 stated, *Ehh again I remember that there was only one of the instructors that sent our assignment back with the eh where he was spotting where are our mistakes. Where the lines and the pages, but they were more grammatical mistakes, not much of the content. I think eh they should focus more on content.*

A point that most students raised is that effective feedback should include some general comments, but the emphasis should be placed on specific comments regarding their performance on a specific assignment (see Question No. 1 again). At the same time, the comments should be analytical and clear enough so as not to allow any room for misinterpretation. Quite characteristically, S5 said: *“As I said, feedback should be analytic, eh clear, thorough and help me improve”.* It was no surprise that the majority of students highlighted this element, since, as noted above, the value of detailed and specific
feedback is constantly stressed and is considered one of its principal strengths (e.g. Gibbs & Simpson, 2005).

- **Students’ emotions**

Naturally, most students reported that feedback affects them emotionally, both positively and negatively, depending on the comments and grades they receive (Question No. 7). Regarding positive feedback, all students expressed satisfaction. They said that it motivates them to continue, it raises their self-esteem and gives them encouragement. These findings agree with other research findings, as documented above, which also shows that DL students are satisfied and express a positive attitude towards written feedback, for the same reasons as the students in the present study (e.g. Mahfoodh, 2016).

However, the interviewees also expressed dissatisfaction over negative feedback. More specifically, they said that negative comments or low grades disappoint them, demotivate them and ultimately make them give up. S4 commented: *I feel demotivated, I think I was, I didn’t want to move on, to eh I was I was I kept thinking about it and I couldn’t move to the next assignment, you know?* Again, the literature review above also confirms that, when feedback is negative, students get hurt and ultimately become unreceptive to tutor comments or opt out (e.g. Burksaitiene, 2012). Thus, as regards the issue of emotions, the students’ opinions show that it can be either a strength or a weakness, depending on the quality and positiveness of the feedback provided.

- **Time**

Time was the next point to be discussed (Question No. 8). As regards the first interpretation of time, namely, how long it takes to receive official feedback after submitting an assignment, all students but one consider that they generally receive their feedback without any significant delay. S2 was the only one to complain about the timing of feedback in some modules. This view agrees with other research in which it is stressed that timely feedback is important in order to be of maximum use (e.g. Hyland, 2013b). Still, the fact that most interviewees are satisfied with the timing of their feedback contrasts with most research on the issue, which reveals student’ dissatisfaction over delayed and ineffective feedback (e.g. Khowaja & Gul, 2014).

Concerning the second interpretation of time, that is whether students receive additional feedback before, during or only after writing an assignment, all students admitted that they would definitely benefit from guidelines before an assignment or from receiving feedback on a draft while in the process of writing. For instance, S2 said: *I think it would be helpful to receive feedback on a draft. Eh you can send a draft earlier to your instructor and ehh he he checks for if you are moving on the right path, because sometimes you feel lost in the assignment.* On the other hand, some students reported that in the event of being absent from a face-to-face meeting, they are basically left without any help or guidance regarding the assignments. Providing guidelines is considered a really important aspect of feedback in the relevant literature (e.g. Handley & Williams, 2011), especially in the distance learning context of the M.Ed. in TESOL. To sum up, the issue of time is generally considered a strength as regards its first interpretation and a challenge as regards its second.
Rubric with assessment criteria

The next question (Question No. 9) concerned the structure of written feedback. As already mentioned, feedback in the HOU entails a rubric with five pre-defined criteria along with an overall comment and grade (see Appendix I). The students’ views on this issue were divided. More specifically, students 3 and 4 had a positive view as regards the use of the rubric. As S3 commented: The rubric. Ehh the rubric ok, it’s quite detailed, comprehensive, analytical, eh generally speaking my opinion is positive. Their opinion is consistent with a large body of research, as noted above, in which the use of rubrics is strongly supported because it was found that they help students clarify the specifics of an assignment (Ghazal et al., 2014), understand their mark and comments or increase their motivation to improve (Ecclestone, 2007).

On the other hand, the rest of the students had more negative views, with students 2 and 5 pointing to the fact that the comments were often quite similar, although addressing different students, or insufficient. This view gains support from the relevant literature, with students in some research also complaining about the quality of the comments in rubrics (e.g. Williams & Smith, 2017). Generally, all students seemed to prefer a combination of this rubric form with specific comments on their assignments, thus showing that the rubric is probably not a sufficient form of feedback on its own.

Interaction between tutor and students

As regards interaction, all students stressed the importance of having good and frequent communication with the instructors, in a number of ways (Question No. 6). Most students, such as S3, mentioned the phone and e-mails, while S2 focused mostly on the contact sessions, which she thought were a bit ineffective, since the feedback that was given in these meetings was quite limited. Generally, with the exception of S4, who was content with the level of interaction with the tutors, all other students seemed somehow dissatisfied and would surely wish they were able to communicate more with their tutors.

It is evident from the above comments that interaction with the instructors as regards written feedback is mostly a weak point in the TESOL M.Ed. This comes as no surprise, since there are quite a lot of studies confirming that feedback is a monological process in a lot of higher education institutions (e.g. Blair & McGinty, 2013; Blair et al., 2013). According to Boud & Molloy (2013) as well as Weaver (2006), the fact that feedback is mostly summative, as in the case of the HOU, is an important reason for this one-way communication.

Grades

As expected, most students said that they cared a lot about the grades they received (Question No. 10). What is more, some of them admitted that they were interested only in the grades, neglecting the accompanying comments. The same view is supported in other research, where the students participating also admit that they primarily care about the grades (e.g. Tuck, 2012). S2 commented: If I was satisfied with the grade, eh the comments were not of so importance, showing that the presence of grades can undermine the value of comments. Moreover, some students mentioned that grades often affected them emotionally. Once again, this negative effect of grades, which can harm the students’ self-esteem, complies with research findings so far (Carless, 2006). Clearly, the presence of grades along with comments is a weakness of the written feedback the students receive.
Throughout the interviews, the students often stated that they experienced inconsistent practices across different modules and tutors. This inconsistency concerned several aspects of the written feedback, such as the level of interaction, the quality of the comments, the timing and the level of clarity. The same issue is highlighted in other research, in which it is supported that the lack of consistency is a frequent challenge as regards written feedback (e.g. Beaumont et al., 2011; Poulos & Mahony, 2008).

4.3. Students’ improvement proposals

The suggestion that was most frequently made by the students was that peer feedback should be practiced during their studies. Most students referred to peer feedback as a significant way to improve the whole process. For S2, for instance, such a practice would be helpful because she relies a lot on communication and co-operation with her peers. On the other hand, S5 stressed the fact that the different roles required when providing peer feedback can be very helpful: *Eh I’d like peer feedback, I think it makes us more responsible, eh we get a different perspective, you know, being the corrector and the the writer.* In the relevant literature, the importance of being able to act as an assessor is also highlighted, since the skills acquired from such a practice are subsequently transferred to one’s own work (e.g. Topping, 1998; 2010). Nonetheless, two students were somehow cautious about this proposal, since they feel that it may be difficult to implement peer feedback or that issues of trust and ability could obstruct the whole process. The same issue is discussed in Evans (2013), who also reports that the success of such a practice is questionable due to issues of trust, confidence, inability or time constraints.

Some students also suggested that it would be really helpful to disengage the comments from the grades, stressing the summative nature of grades. *Feedback should be in the form of comments and not grades, because in this phase, in this time we develop ourselves, we learn, even as teachers we learn. So, the focus should not be on the grade, the focus should be on comments, of amendments in our in our work* (S1). The same proposal can be found in quite a few studies, in which it is argued that the summative role of grades is questionable, while at the same time student engagement with the feedback is impeded (e.g. Carless, 2006).

Another suggestion made by the interviewees is the need to update and upgrade the studies in the HOU technologically. This proposal comes as no surprise, since, as already noted, the HOU demonstrates some deficiencies in the use of ICT, especially if compared to other distance learning institutions (Koustourakis et al., 2008). As expected, the use of ICT is heavily supported in a lot of research, since more and more studies show that it can help to establish a more dialogical approach to feedback (e.g. Gipps, 2005). Moreover, increasing the use of ICT would simplify the demanding role of the instructor when providing feedback, especially on the issue of timely feedback (Agius & Wilkinson, 2014).

Finally, two students referred to changes in the rubric procedure, either by implying that the pre-defined criteria should not be used, or by suggesting some different criteria: *Maybe the pre-defined rubrics, the form, I would think that it has to change because all of the four years of my studies was the same. Maybe it’s time to change the form of marking, eh be more descriptive* (S2). *Ehh what changes eh maybe there should be another criterion according to which ehh the criterion let’s say of innovativeness, innovative ideas. Eh or maybe (coughs) the criterion of research, how or to what extent the instructor got eh the idea that you had done quite eh a big research, extensive research* (S3). Within a broader
perspective, Rae and Cochrane (2008) also suggest that the feedback policy be a product of negotiation between the faculty and the students, thus ensuring maximum utility.

5. Implications, limitations and suggestions for further research

5.1. Implications

The present study has some interesting implications for the highly significant issue of written feedback on DL assignments. First, as regards the form of written feedback, the students’ responses suggest that they would surely prefer to have a role in the process, for instance in the act of postulating assessment criteria. Within a broader perspective, it is suggested that students be more involved in all the stages of feedback provision, from the negotiation of the feedback policy to the inclusion of alternative and more student-centred feedback forms, such as peer feedback (Topping, 1998; 2010; Vickerman, 2009). The need for broader student involvement is also supported by several researchers and this calls for greater awareness of the students’ needs (e.g. Evans, 2013).

Another implication of the findings of this study is that feedback should serve more formative purposes, by focusing more on the students’ development and future progression, instead of being primarily summative and marks-focused (e.g. Hounsell et al., 2008).

Finally, it was evident from the research findings that the students are in need of a more sophisticated and updated ICT support system. As already discussed above, this is a central issue in all distance learning institutions (Koustourakis et al., 2008). It is thus essential that the use of ICT be upgraded so as to cater for the diverse needs of DL students.

5.2. Limitations of present study and suggestions for further research

Needless to say, there are limitations to this research. One limitation concerns the size of the sample. Although it can generally be considered satisfactory for the purposes of qualitative research (Weaver, 2006), as suggested above, the specific students’ perceptions on the issue of written feedback are not necessarily representative of a broader student population. Another factor that could possibly limit the generalizability of the research findings is the fact that the sample was quite homogeneous, with all students being female and having attended almost the same modules.

Considering the above limitations, it is only natural to suggest that a larger study, with a more expanded sample is required. Larger-scale research would be able to validate the findings of the present work, either by confirming the results of this study or by yielding different ones. Moreover, in order to be able to include more participants, future research could follow a mixed methodology, combining qualitative and quantitative methods (Creswell, 2013). It would also be interesting to include staff perceptions on the important issue of effective feedback provision. According to Lea & Street (1998), student and teacher perceptions differ a lot quite often, so a comparative study would be quite helpful and enlightening.
References


Although a full scale is not included, students might receive less than 4.
Appendix II

The interview questions

1. Generally speaking, do you believe that the feedback on your assignments is effective and helpful? In what ways?
2. Why is it important that feedback is written?
3. How much do you value praises? Do you think they are necessary or not?
4. Do you consider that feedback is generally clear or ambiguous and why?
5. What is your view concerning feedback focusing on surface features of language, like grammatical errors, for example?
6. What are your comments on the level of interaction with the instructor as regards the feedback you receive, especially in such a distance learning context?
7. Does feedback affect you emotionally? In what ways?
8. What about the timing of your feedback?
9. What is your opinion about its structure (the fact that there is a rubric with pre-defined criteria)? Do you receive any in-text comments, too?
10. Do you pay equal attention to both the grades and the comments? Why/Why not?
11. What changes or amendments as regards feedback in its current form would you propose?

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Let feedback make the connection: Battling isolation in Distance Learning — The case of the MEd in TESOL students of the Hellenic Open University

Despoina MALIOTAKI

The study presented in this article explores a major issue of distance learners’ life: isolation. Isolation is a non-productive emotional state, the presence or absence of which can make a difference between a successful and an unsuccessful learning experience. Yet, no studies have been performed exploring the relationship between isolation and written assignment feedback in the context of the M. Ed. in TESOL programme of the Hellenic Open University (HOU). Our purpose, thus, was to explore the dimensions of isolation in this distance learning context and discover the feedback properties that can reduce this feeling for those who experience it. A sample of 58 students on the specific course completed a questionnaire and 6 interviews were also conducted for clarification and triangulation purposes. The questionnaire data was analysed with the use of SPSS. Frequencies and medians were calculated for Likert scale items and correlation tests were performed to determine the interplay between specific variables. Isolation was examined through the lens of transactional distance and, specifically, by measuring the attitudes of the learners on the course towards the variables that constitute transactional distance. Our research showed that isolation exists. It also showed that strengthening the tutor-learner dialogue, peer-to-peer communication and the bond of the student community through feedback provision could play an important role in the battle against it.
απουσία ή η παρουσία της οποίας μπορεί να επηρεάσει ισχυρά την πορεία ενός σπουδαστή. Λόγω της έλλειψης ερευνών συμπεριλαμβανομένων στην αλληλεπίδραση ανάμεσα στο αίσθημα της απομόνωσης και την ανατροφοδότηση στα πλαίσια του προγράμματος Διδακτικής Αγγλικής ως Ξένη/Διεθνείς Γλώσσας του ΕΑΠ, αποφασίσαμε να διερεύσουμε την σχέση ανάμεσα στους δυο αυτούς παράγοντες και να ανιχνεύσουμε τις αρχές που θα έπρεπε να διέπουν την αντανακλαστική περιφέρεια της απομόνωσης που διώχνουν οι φοιτητές. Ένα δείγμα αποτελούμενο από 58 φοιτητές του προγράμματος συμμετείχε το έρευνα συμπληρώνοντας ένα ερωτηματολόγιο, ενώ έξι φοιτητές συμμετείχαν σε μια διαδικασία συνέντευξης, η οποία διεξήχθη για λόγους τριγωνοποίησης και μελέτης των δεδομένων σε μεγάλοτερο βάθος. Τα δεδομένα των ερωτηματολογίων αναλύθηκαν με το στατιστικό πακέτο SPSS, υπολογίζοντας συχνότητες και διαμέσου για τις τιμές των μεταβλητών της κλίμακας Likert. Επίσης, διερευνήθηκαν οι συσχετισμοί ανάμεσα σε συγκεκριμένες μεταβλητές. Το αίσθημα της απομόνωσης εξαρτάται μέσω της απόστασης συναλλαγής και, συγκεκριμένα, εξατακτάζοντας τη στάση των φοιτητών απέρριψε το πρόγραμμα σε σχέση με τους παράγοντες που ρυθμίζουν την απόσταση συναλλαγής. Η έρευνα μας έδειξε ότι το αίσθημα της απομόνωσης είναι ένα υπαρκτό πρόβλημα. Ακόμη, έγινε φανερό ότι η ενδυνάμωση της συνδιαλλαγής σπουδαστή-διδάσκοντα, της επικοινωνίας ανάμεσα στους σπουδαστές και του δεσμού της σπουδαστικής κοινότητας μέσω της παροχής ανατροφοδότησης μπορεί να παίξει καθοριστικό ρόλο στην μάχη ενάντια στην απομόνωση των φοιτητών.

Key words: isolation, community, transactional distance, dialogic feedback, socio-constructivism, distance learning

1. Community and learning: an introduction

The survival of our species was never about physical strength. Our capacity for creating communities and our capacity for learning and elaboration on that learning is what made us thrive. Learning takes place in groups and knowledge-making is a process that requires a community. Back in the 4th century BCE, in his Politics, Aristotle pointed out exactly that: Learning has to involve interaction with one’s environment and being isolated is not a state that fits humans. Humans, according to Aristotle, are born to form social partnerships of various kinds in order to avoid isolation and these partnerships are central to the creation of knowledge. Nevertheless, isolation is not always abolished in the company of others. Loneliness is not confined to the physical absence of someone and this is essentially what the snake says to the Little Prince, centuries after Aristotle: “It is lonely when you’re among people, too” (Saint-Exupéry, 1943).

Aristotle’s view became extremely influential in the field of education. Socio-constructivism, building on these premises, maintains that you cannot take humans out of their environment and you cannot take the environment out of the human, emphasizing the importance of “dialogue, conversation, argument, and the justification of student and teacher opinions in a social setting” (Matthews, 1993, p. 359) in order for learning to flourish. And, although we tend to forget about it sometimes, this is true for all kinds of learners and education settings, from the very early stages of our development up to university education and beyond.
In what follows, I will attempt to show the importance of community for Distance Learning (DL) university programmes and the repercussions of the lack of community for students and their academic achievement. Initially, I will delve into DL students’ feeling of isolation and transactional distance, that is the reason behind it. I will then analyze the factors that parameterize transactional distance and explore ways to anticipate and prevent it through the use of written assignment feedback. Finally, the study performed will be presented and its results and implications for DL will be discussed.

2. Community and distance Learning

Belonging to a community has been shown to be important for university students of all kinds by playing a significant role in both one’s academic and one’s personal development (Lee & Chan, 2007; Venter, 2003). In the context of (DL), however, this appears to be problematic. Distance seems to play a major role with regard to the success of a DL programme, as it has been found to seriously affect students’ satisfaction, motivation and academic performance (Cereijo et al., 2001; Wegerif, 1998). In addition, it has been demonstrated that DL programmes tend to have the highest drop-out rates (Carr, 2000; Rovai, 2002; Yukselturk & Inan, 2006).

This tendency can be traced back to the isolation these students experience because of the distance and the limited interaction with the tutor and/or their fellow students that this distance entails (Delahoussaye & Zemke, 2001; Egbert & Thomas, 2001; Hipp, 1997). In DL, it is easy for learners to become detached not only from their tutors but also from their fellow students or their course because of lack of face-to-face contact (Dickey, 2004; Ibrahim et al., 2007) -- or due to face-to-face contact that is perceived as insufficient -- and that interferes with their motivation in a negative way (Wood, 1996). Talking about isolation caused by distance in a 21st century educational context might sound odd, for, hasn’t the Internet helped to bridge distances between people? Well, albeit relevant, it is not physical distance or physical distance alone that is being referred to here.

3. Transactional distance

Apart from the separation of our physical bodies, then, DL also entails a separation of perceptions and understandings, which must be reduced if effective learning is to occur (Moore, 1991). The distance described above is termed “transactional distance” by Moore (1980) and seems to be the main cause of isolation in DL programmes. Transactional Distance is, according to Moore (1991), “a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner” (p. 3). This perceptual distance is present in every educational transaction (Moore, 1993) and might be based on demographic factors such as age and gender, cultural differences or different mindsets.

According to Galusha (1998), isolation is caused by transactional distance and it can seriously dampen distance learners’ urge for academic development by making the learning process even more complicated for them. This can result in lack of willingness and confidence on the part of the learner and can make them gradually detach themselves from the learning process, affecting their performance in a negative way. Wheeler (2007) maintains that perceptual distances have profound effects on learners who are separated from their tutors for long chunks of time; the fact that they are distanced from the academic community, unable to regularly debate and socialize with their peers and tutors, may lead to heightened
feelings of distance, inadequacy and insecurity, and a lack of confidence in their own abilities (Wheeler, 2007; Wood, 1996). In these conditions the learner-instructor dialogue is affected both quantitatively and qualitatively, increasing transactional distance. Therefore, misunderstandings, misapprehension of the tutor’s contribution to the dialogue or of feedback are more than likely to occur. This is something that can increase the feeling of isolation (Kostina, 2011) and lead learners to lose their capability for self-evaluation (Galusha, 1998), which, in turn, interferes with learner autonomy, increasing the learner’s dependency on the tutor and ultimately creating a vicious circle, which can be seriously damaging to a learner’s academic achievement.

Given the factors of culture and mindset, transactional distance, as described above, is not perceived in the same way by all learners in a specific program; it is a relative, rather than an absolute variable (Moore, 1993). Over the years, many researchers analyzed and attempted to determine more clearly the concept of transactional distance and its variables, along with their functions (Chen & Willits, 1998; Gokool-Ramdoo, 2008; Saba & Shearer, 1994). These variables are considered to be three and are labelled as follows: ‘dialogue’, ‘structure’ and ‘learner autonomy’.

Dialogue is the interaction between the teacher and the learner, a kind of interaction that is purposeful, constructive and valued by each party and to which each party is an active contributor (Moore, 1993). The purpose of dialogue is to enhance understanding (ibid.) of concepts, meanings and ways of thinking in order to deepen mental processes and learning.

The element of structure has to do with the rigidity or flexibility of the programme’s educational objectives, teaching strategies and evaluation methods (Moore, 1993, p. 26), that is, “an educational programme’s responsiveness to learners’ individual needs” (Moore 1983, p. 171). A flexible structure may correspond to a learner’s needs, making learning a naturally-flowing process, in which a learner feels supported, whereas a more rigid structure demands a constant amount of struggle on the learner’s part; a struggle to conform and fit inside a framework, which does not facilitate learning.

Finally, the element of learner autonomy refers to the ability of a learner to assume responsibility for their own learning or, put differently, to the extent to which the learner is able to determine the goals, the learning experiences and the evaluation decisions of the learning programme (Moore, 1993, p.31). Essentially, autonomy in a learner determines their capacity for metacognition; to be able to reflect upon, critique and evaluate their work methods and ways of learning, their ideas and understanding of concepts. In addition, an autonomous learner is capable of setting personal goals and carving the path to their attainment without feeling heavily dependent on a tutor, whose role is to facilitate and give guidelines when necessary.

The measure of transactional distance in each education programme is, according to Moore, dependent on these three variables, or, rather, a function of them (Moore, 1993, p. 23). Structure and dialogue are inversely proportionate, that is, the more structured an educational programme is, the less the space provided for dialogue and negotiations of meaning, and the greater the distance perceived by the learner (Gokool-Ramdoo, 2008). However, a greater distance -- allowing more space for misunderstandings -- also means that the learner needs to exercise more responsibility for their learning, which means that the relationship between transactional distance and autonomy is directly proportionate.
4. The fight against isolation: employing written assignment feedback

Research tells us that, in fighting this isolation, building and maintaining a sense of community through interaction is important. According to Keegan (1996), student and teacher detachment deprives communication between the two parties of a vital link, which should be re-invented so as to “re-integrate” the teacher-learner interaction. Ferratt & Hall (2009) have argued that the aim of educators should be to extend the vision of distance education to “learning via virtually being there and beyond” (p. 425), that is to focus on promoting tutor-learner and peer interaction both during class sessions and beyond them (but also beyond academic issues), since interaction is considered a necessary ingredient of a successful learning experience (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004; Moore, 1989). In accomplishing this, a major role is played by technology, which has changed the dynamics of instruction methods over the years, as well as the pedagogy behind distance education (Beldarrain, 2006).

Since the key to battling isolation in DL is communication, restructuring a DL course and making it more communicative, actively involving tutors and learners on a regular basis, fostering intellectually stimulating interactions -- exchange of ideas between instructors and learners or among learners -- seems to be a wise action plan. After all, according to Vrasidas & McIsaac (1999), this is what good teaching must involve.

Researchers claim that, in the process towards a more interactive course structure, online communities should be created and constant effort should be made by the instructor to remind learners of their online social presence (Cutler, 1995; Palloff & Pratt, 1999) and facilitate group interaction so that the learners feel they have someone to turn to at any point.

In the context of the HOU, if our aim is to minimize isolation in DL, within a socio-constructivist framework, where individuals are part of their environment and that environment is part of the individual, too (Bredo, 1994; Gredler, 1997), written assignment feedback may need to become more synchronous, in the sense of acquiring a more interactive nature. This becomes imperative because written assignment feedback is a highly important component of students’ studies, and, in actual fact, the main form of -- and incentive for -- interaction that HOU students have with their tutors (Iliadou, 2011).

4.1. What kind of feedback?

At this point, one feels the need to specify how feedback is viewed within a social constructivist frame of reference. It is generally acknowledged that feedback is an assistance mechanism for learning, aiming towards improvement. Feedback is “information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way” (Ramaprasad, 1983, p. 4). Therefore, student engagement is necessary; information about the gap cannot be considered feedback unless it is consciously used by the recipient in order to bridge that gap.

It has also been found that high level and complex learning is best developed when feedback is viewed as a relational process that takes place over time, is dialogic, and is integral to the whole process of learning and teaching itself (Sambell, 2011). Furthermore, Askew and Lodge (2001) define feedback as “all dialogue to support learning in both formal and informal situations” (p. 1). This adds one more dimension to feedback: dialogue, which, in the context of feedback provision, is more than conversation or exchange of ideas; it also implies the
existence of relationships in which participants think and reason together (Calfoglou, 2010; Gravett & Petersen, 2002).

What can be concluded from the above, is that learner-centeredness is fundamental to our approach, tying our discussion back to the social constructivist paradigm in pedagogy, articulated by Vygotsky (1978) as the idea that dialogue, guidance, feedback and social interactions are drivers for the transformation of potential development into actual ability (Ehiyazaryan-White, 2012). We have seen that feedback is the give-and-take of information, the sum of interactions the scope of which is not only to enhance learning but also to be utilized by learners so as to improve their performance and support the learning process. After all, more learner-centeredness and more dialogue imply less structure. And less structure equals reduced transactional distance (Moore, 1993).

The feedback possessing the aforementioned qualities would need to focus on modifying the learners’ thinking or behaviour in order to improve the acquisition of skills and facilitate learning; it would be related to specific learning goals, encouraging teacher-learner and peer dialogue (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006), inviting learners’ active engagement with it. And that would be formative dialogic feedback.

Such, we believe, should be the focus of written assignment feedback, despite the fact that there is a summative side to it, that is, a grade given for each assignment for evaluative purposes. According to HOU regulations, the role of written assignments is pivotal because not only do they promote learners’ self-awareness, but also, via the feedback process, they foster learner-tutor communication and they encourage and motivate learners to develop their skills, deepen their knowledge and advance their academic performance (HOU, 2011), and this is the function of formative feedback.

4.2. The case for peer dialogic feedback

Such a learner-centred approach should be based on continuous dialogue between not only tutors and learners but also among peers (Ehiyazaryan-White, 2012). Another facet of dialogic feedback is peer dialogic feedback. In his attempt to define feedback, Ypsilantis (2002, p. 169) adds that we have come to a point where it is generally understood that feedback can be provided by other learners or even by each individual learner for themselves. The literature suggests that peer feedback can be a positive experience for students (De Grez et al., 2010; Fund, 2010) which can lead to enhanced performance (Carillo-de-la-Pena et al., 2009; Sluijsmans et al., 2002). Moreover, Preece (2000) identifies qualities of online communities, showing how they can contribute greatly to DL. These qualities include shared goals, access to shared resources, engagement in providing continuous support for each other and the use of shared policies (Preece, 2000).

In addition, according to Yang & Carless (2013), peer dialogic feedback can be used as a means of reducing the negative effect that power relations tend to have on learners and the negative emotions that can be produced as a result. At the same time, it strengthens the social-relational aspects of feedback (ibid.), enhancing the preservation of a community. Furthermore, according to work by Sorensen & Takle (2005), and Vonderwell et al. (2007), formative feedback within online communities works towards interactivity and collaboration, providing learners with opportunities for dynamic and meaningful interactions with their peers and thus resulting in a continuous process of giving and receiving feedback\(^1\).

\(^1\) Despite the fact that there is considerable amount of research enumerating the benefits that the implementation of peer feedback procedures can have in education, the objections against it are still
5. The research

The questions we addressed in the present research are the following:

a. What is the relationship between student isolation and student performance in DL?

b. What is the relationship between written assignment feedback and the feeling of isolation in DL university programmes?

c. What configurations should be made in the feedback provision process currently employed by the HOU to enhance the feeling of community and minimize transactional distance between HOU MEd in TESOL students and their tutors?

The research method chosen combined quantitative and qualitative tools. We made use of web-based questionnaires with both quantitative type questions and open-ended qualitative type ones. The purely qualitative part of the study included a set of six standardized open-ended question interviews and attempted to shed light on certain dark areas in the data gathered through the questionnaires.

The questionnaire designed combines a total of 20 open-ended and closed-ended questions, mainly multiple response and 5-point Likert scale ones. The data collected with the questionnaires was entered on SPSS version 24.0 and descriptive analysis was performed. After the questionnaires were collected and examined, six standardized open-ended question interviews took place, sent via e-mail to the Yahoo Groups HOU students are members of. The questions were split into groups and each group corresponded to one of the research questions. The interviewees answered the questions in the attached document and e-mailed it back to the researcher.

The target population for this research was composed of students of the MEd in TESOL programme of the Hellenic Open University and the sample consisted of 64 students in total, who attended the programme during the academic year of 2016-2017, including those who were working on their dissertation at the time. The questionnaire respondents were 58 students, while six participated in the interviews. The participants were chosen via random (probability) sampling, which helped in ridding the sample of any subjectivity that convenience or snowball sampling (non-probability sampling methods) could have added to it (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2012). Probability samples have less risk of bias (Cohen et al., 2007) and are more useful if the researcher wishes to be able to make generalizations, because they represent the wider population in a better way than non-probability samples (ibid.). In this way, we tried to make sure that every member of the population had an equal chance of participation in the research. Therefore, we believe that, despite the relatively small number of respondents, the results of the research can be generalized in the particular social setting (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992), that is, the MEd in TESOL students of the HOU.

many. It seems that the acceptance of peer feedback is largely a matter of culture and training, for both students and educators.

2 The Questionnaire can be found in Appendix I.

3 The vast majority of the respondents are female (95%), belonging to the extended age group of 26-45 years of age (81%). 53% of the respondents were on modules 1 and/or 2 and 16 (about 30%) were drafting their dissertation.
6. The results

6.1. The questionnaire results

The results we gathered yielded information that was essential to our research. We begin by providing a brief overview of the results regarding the first two research questions, concerning the relationship between student isolation and student performance in DL and that between written assignment feedback and the feeling of isolation in DL university programmes. Then we move on to discuss the findings on the third research question, regarding the changes which the MEd in TESOL students of the HOU consider necessary for the feedback provision process currently employed by the HOU to enhance the feeling of community and minimize transactional distance between them and their tutors.

To begin with, according to the research results, which fully confirmed what had been hypothesized regarding isolation, this feeling is present among the students of the programme and it is not strictly related to the physical distance between the learners and their instructor but to transactional distance instead. In most of the research, the participants dealt with their relationship with their tutor: according to the data collected, the quality of the tutor-learner dialogue is undermined by lack of intimacy, lack of time for and timeliness of interactions. These are considered by students to be serious reasons underlying performance that they deem unsatisfactory, while misunderstandings and negative feelings created through the feedback process result in awkwardness and hesitation as regards future interactions.

The students do not, generally, feel uncomfortable when communicating with their tutor, but their communication is sparse, according to their answers, while necessity seems to be the mother of interactions between learners and tutors. Having found out this, we set out to discover the relationship between the frequency of student - tutor communication and how comfortable the students feel when they contact their tutor. A Scatter/Dot analysis and a Pearson Correlation test showed that the relationship between the variables of frequency and comfortableness during communication is neither monotonous nor strong (see Figures 1a and 1b). The scatterplot displays no strong, monotonous or linear relationship between the two variables and we also notice that Pearson’s r is less than 0.5. This means that there is a weak relationship between the two variables:

![Scatterplot](image-url)
As we had expected from our review of the literature, negative feelings lead to detachment from the course and the tutor and decreased willingness, motivation and self-esteem on the part of the learner (See also Galusha, 1998; Wheeler, 2007). These feelings prevent students from being productive and from developing, and can cause a student to leave the programme or at least to consider the possibility of doing so, clearly impeding academic achievement. Moreover, most students try to attend all contact sessions in a module in search of face-to-face contact. Face-to-face contact during contact sessions, however, is not the students’ preferred medium of interaction with their tutor; they mostly prefer sending e-mails. This could be evidence for the inadequacy of contact sessions in encouraging bonding or getting to know each other. In addition, it could be said that this shows that the contact sessions fail to live up to the students’ needs, they are not individualized enough.

In addition, judging from the participants’ response to the question regarding the correspondence between the students’ work and abilities, and their grades, the levels of satisfaction among the students participating in the research were quite high. More specifically, we asked participants to state whether or not they are satisfied with their grades so far, taking into account their abilities and personal effort, as a first indicator of overall satisfaction with their studies. Out of the 58 participants, 74% (43 students) stated they are satisfied with their grades. In any case, grades are a motivational force as well as very important, because they affect students’ feelings of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994). Asking this question thus helped us create a disposition-related context for each set of responses.

However, the learners’ impression that written assignment feedback is not personalized and their view that feedback is not an opportunity for an academic discussion with the tutor suggest dissatisfaction. In other words, students feel isolated when their feedback is not personalized and cannot assist their development because it does not address their needs. The necessity for needs assessment, therefore, arises. Also, both judgmental feedback, focussing on what has been done wrong and neglecting any positive aspects of a piece of work, and feedback that is perceived as unfair make students withdraw mentally and emotionally from the course and the tutor, and also make the distance feel greater, augmenting their sense of isolation.

Out of 58 students, 36 stated that judgmental feedback mostly gives them disappointment (62%) and 34 that it deprives them of motivation (59%), while 53% (31 students) stated that this type of feedback makes them feel frustrated (see Figure 2):
In addition, when the students were asked to state on which occasions written assignment feedback makes the distance feel greater, feedback perceived as negative was chosen by 45 out of the 58 participants (78%) (Figure 3):

Another feedback-related factor that augments transactional distance, according to the findings, is the very document e-mailed to the students, on which written assignment feedback is provided. Written assignment feedback is composed according to a rubric which restricts feedbacking to certain criteria and is an end-product, allowing no interactivity or contribution on the part of the student. More specifically, students stated that “sitting and waiting to receive a form filled in with comments is demotivating” and “You just sit and wait for it doing nothing. No contributions from you.”
Another important finding is that students claim that this form of post-text feedback\(^4\) is a source of misunderstandings which adds more hurdles to the already complicated tutor-learner dialogue, also increasing isolation: “…sometimes, something may be put into words that are ambiguous and the tutor perceives it as something else” and “Sometimes tutors make mistakes or they don’t read the assignments carefully enough and the final grade does not correspond to the work done”, to give but a few examples.

However, when we asked participants to choose the feedback qualities that enhance the feeling of belonging to a community, in order to discover what feedback features can reduce the feeling of isolation, the majority (67%) said that feedback enhances inclusivity when it encourages sharing best practices. This shows that the students are in favour of community building and interactivity, appreciating the benefits it holds against isolation.

The last part of the research results includes the kind of feedback qualities that can reduce isolation, according to what the students suggested. In Table 1, we can see a detailed presentation of the question which aimed to explore the possibility of transforming the feedback provision process using a variety of features and applying a structure that could render it more inclusive and community-sustaining in order to battle isolation in the DL environment, according to the literature and what has already been discussed.

To begin with, (67%) of the respondents fully or partly agree that written assignment feedback should take into account a student’s previous work in the module (assignments or any other information the tutor might have at their disposal) and their background (educational, professional etc.) when this is possible (Median = 2, ‘partly agree’). Also, 83% fully or partly agree that feedback should not be viewed as a fixed product that cannot change, but rather as a dialogic process (Median = 2, ‘partly agree’), while 71% fully agree (Median = 1) that it is necessary to be able to discuss the written assignment feedback with your tutor.

\(^{3}\) Post-text feedback is the kind of feedback provided to the students after the submission of their assignments, as opposed to pre-text feedback, which refers to feedback provided over the period of assignment preparation.
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<th>fully agree</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Written assignment feedback should be taking into account a student's previous work in the module and their background if possible.</td>
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<td>b. Written assignment feedback should not be viewed as a fixed product, unable to change, but, rather, as a dialogic process.</td>
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<td>c. It is necessary to be able to discuss the written assignment feedback with your tutor.</td>
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<td>d. Giving and receiving peer feedback while writing an assignment is useful.</td>
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<td>16</td>
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<td>e. Assignment feedback should be given by the tutor both in the stage of writing the assignment and after its submission.</td>
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<td>f. It is important that written assignment feedback should be subject to discussion and change, if necessary, so that it becomes more relevant to students and their needs.</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>g. While-writing, process assignment feedback had better be given on an electronic platform, where dialogue would be possible.</td>
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h. Allowing feedback from fellow students on an electronic platform would be useful.

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i. Written assignment feedback should encourage self-development.

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Table 1. Remedial steps to be taken in feedback provision

The usefulness of peer feedback while writing an assignment proved more debatable than other suggestions, but the result is still quite encouraging for peer feedback supporters. Thus, about 59% of the respondents fully or partly agree that peer feedback while writing an assignment would be useful, while only 6 (about 10%) partly or fully disagree. Extending the feedback provision process throughout the period of assignment preparation in order to battle isolation (Question 19e) is also very appealing to students: 49 respondents (84%) fully or partly agree that this feature is necessary (Median = 1, ‘fully agree’). Furthermore, 46 participants (80%) answered that they fully or partly agree that feedback should be subject to discussion in order to become more relevant to the students’ needs (Median = 2, ‘partly agree’); more personalized feedback is shown to be very important again.

When respondents were asked to state their opinion on whether while-writing feedback should be given on an electronic platform, where dialogue would be possible, 43 (75%) said they fully or partly agree with that (Median = 2, ‘partly agree’). However, in the following statement (19h) only 30 (52%) respondents said they fully or partly agree that peer feedback on an electronic platform would be useful (Median = 2, ‘partly agree’). As in statement 19d, some reservation towards peer feedback can also be noted here. While the median is the same for the above statements, the number of responses for the first two choices differs significantly in each question, which means that the median needs further supplementation to help interpret these results.

Finally, 48 participants (83%) responded that they fully agree that written assignment feedback should encourage self-development (Median = 1), i.e., it should provide what is necessary for each student to develop as a learner and be autonomous. We have already discussed the importance of being able to regulate one’s own learning and development in DL in order to depend less on the tutor, reduce the transactional distance and feel less isolated. It seems that the students do understand that importance.

The results obtained for this last question revealed the students’ longing for more dialogue and collaboration both with their tutor and their peers in feedback provision, and their need for more learner-centered, personalized, autonomy-promoting feedback that, as a dialogic process, stretches across all the stages of assignment preparation, promoting community building and battling isolation. In essence, we see how building written assignment feedback provision on a socio-constructivist framework can possibly make a DL university programme immune to student isolation and all that isolation could entail.
5.2. The interview results

According to the interviewees, isolation is something that exists in the programme, caused mainly by the poor quality of tutor-learner dialogue, bad assignment performance and heavy coursework. These elements generate negative feelings in learners, such as dissatisfaction, disengagement and lack of motivation, which lead them to feeling isolated and cause them to consider dropping out of the program. According to the responses we got, feedback personalization is important because impersonal feedback appears to be able to cause negative feelings both towards the tutor, affecting the dialogue with the student, and towards their studies, reducing motivation and engagement while increasing transactional distance.

The tutor-learner relationship also emerges as seminal to transactional distance. According to the interviewees, a good dialogue cannot only be built on written assignment feedback; a more personal relationship is necessary and that points towards the integration of more interaction within the feedback provision process. Although students recognize the need for more face to-face contact, more contact sessions are not welcome. Therefore, interaction should be enhanced in a different way.

Peer feedback is met with some reserve in certain students’ responses, although its necessity and importance are recognized, while post-text feedback appears to be problematic in the sense that it might hamper the tutor’s judgment and generate feelings of injustice and resentment in the learners. Because of this, pre-text, process feedback was suggested as a more democratic and personalized form of feedback provision. Finally, the interviews demonstrated that relationships can be created among students of the programme. These are founded mostly on feelings of sympathy and support during the difficult times they share, although the extent and frequency of their communication was not determined.

7. Conclusion

The study presented here tackled the issue of isolation in university DL education programmes and tried to show how isolation can be battled against through the use of written assignment feedback provision structured on a socio-constructivist framework. Let us briefly recap the most important conclusions this research has reached.

All in all, encouragement and praise emerge as big winners in minimizing transactional distance. Personal comments and advice on how to improve and overcome one’s weaknesses were also found to reduce isolation. Because post-text written feedback was identified as an isolation booster, students advocated the introduction of pre-text feedback, identifying benefits that would actually help reduce transactional distance.

Learners also believe that what would help them feel less isolated would be the opportunity to participate in the feedback process actively, i.e., having the option to defend one’s assignment and negotiate the tutor’s written feedback and grade on their work in order to avoid feelings of injustice and neglect, which amplify transactional distance. According to what the students said, written assignment feedback on its own is not enough to build a relationship with the tutor and make the distance learner feel that they belong to a community; a more personal relationship seems necessary.
Another important issue the students brought up is that of the importance of sharing best practices and the effect of this method towards community bonding. Peer feedback was also presented as something that would make the distance between the class members feel smaller and would build the path towards sustaining a more close-knit community. It should, nevertheless, be noted that some reservations towards this kind of feedback were expressed. We would also argue that, if we wish to upgrade the quality of scientists who graduate the institution, peer feedback is something that should be adopted as an official practice in the programme to shift responsibility to the students. It has been argued that students tend to view feedback on their work as the responsibility of someone else (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Sadler, 2010). But pluralism is very important and so is personal responsibility for quality work and objective judgment of one’s own self.

As this work has attempted to show, the relationships among peers and tutors are complex, with a lot of implications for every individual student’s academic progress (Price et al., 2011) and the success of an academic programme. It seems that more research into these relationships is necessary so as to extend the frontiers postulated by our perception of isolation within an academic context and improve the quality of academic distance education.

References


Education: The Journal for Open and Distance Education and Educational technology, 7(1): 6-20.
Rovai, A. (2002). ‘Building Sense of Community at a Distance’. International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 3 (1).


APPENDIX

The Questionnaire

Dissertation Research Questionnaire

*Required

Isolation and Feedback in Distance Education

Dear colleagues,

My name is Despoina Maliotaki and I am currently in my final year of studies in the MEd in TESOL program of the Hellenic Open University. As part of my thesis research, I have created this questionnaire and I would be more than delighted if you could spare some of your precious time to complete it.

I understand that loads of questionnaires received might make one unwilling to bother answering one more, but I would kindly invite you to think about it not only as a colleague’s personal research, but in terms of the overall contribution that you are making to our field by participating. Your answers are extremely important as I hope you will realize when you continue reading.

My research, which is focussed on the students of MEd in TESOL of the Hellenic Open University, has to do with the feeling of isolation that students in distance learning programs have been found to experience, and the effects it can have on a student’s academic performance and development. I intend to explore how much the form in which we receive written feedback on our assignments moderates the experience of this feeling as well as what changes in it you would welcome in order to minimize that feeling of isolation and enhance our sense of community.

Please be as truthful as possible in completing this questionnaire. All questions were created with how for what we do, having in mind the improvement of our experience in our studies. Neediness to say, confidentiality and anonymity are granted. I promise it will not take long.

Sincerely yours,

Despoina

Contact details

* e-mail: deswme@otenipo.com
  * Facebook: [https://www.facebook.com/despina.maliotaki](https://www.facebook.com/despina.maliotaki)
  * Skype: dabbia.mal

1. 1. Gender: Mark the one that applies.
   
   Mark only one oval.
   
   - Female
   - Male
   - Would prefer not to say

2. 2. Age: Mark the one that applies.
   
   Mark only one oval.
   
   - 22-25
   - 26-35
   - 36-45
   - 46-55
   - 56+

3. 3. Which is the module (or module) you are currently on? (More than one answer possible.)
   
   Tick all that apply.
   
   - Module 1
   - Module 2
   - Module 3
   - Module 4
   - Dissertation

4. 4. Do the grades you have got so far in the Modules you have completed represent your abilities and the effort you have put into your academic work?

   Mark only one oval.
   
   - Yes
   - No

5. 5. How many contact sessions on average do you attend per module? 

   Skip to question 6.

Isolation and Performance

This section addresses feelings of loneliness that you may have experienced or might be experiencing in the course of your studies. It also addresses the effect such feelings might have on your academic performance.

6. 1. How often do you contact your tutor?

   Mark only one oval.
   
   - very often
   - quite often
   - sometimes
   - rarely
   - never

7. 2. When you contact your tutor, you feel:

   Mark only one oval.
   
   - Very comfortable
   - Quite comfortable
   - Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable
   - Rather uncomfortable
   - Very uncomfortable

8. 3. When do you choose to contact your tutor? (More than one answer possible.)

   Tick all that apply.
   
   - during contact sessions.
   - before deadlines, when I am preparing for assignment submission.
   - after assignment feedback has been received.
   - when I read something interesting and I need to talk about it.
   - whenever I feel the need to talk to someone about my studies.
   - Other:

9. 4. What medium do you choose in communicating with your tutor? (More than one answer possible.)

   Tick all that apply.
   
   - face-to-face contact (e.g., during contact sessions)
   - telephone
   - e-mail
   - Facebook
   - Skype
   - EAP Forums
   - Other:
10. Please rate the following statements from 1 to 5: 1=very often, 2=quite often, 3=sometimes, 4=rarely, 5=never. Considering all the modules you have taken so far, how often have you felt that?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. you have questions on academic issues but nobody is willing to help you?</td>
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<td>b. you are in this course alone in good times and bad times—just you and your computer?</td>
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<td>c. the workload is too much and support from your tutor does not suffice?</td>
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<td>d. you had better quit your studies at HKU because distance learning does not help you perform well?</td>
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<td>e. your performance would be better if you had received more feedback in time?</td>
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<td>f. there is not enough support from the academic environment (tutors, fellow students and the University) to help you in your studies?</td>
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<td>g. your performance would be better if you had received more feedback on your assignments?</td>
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<td>h. the physical distance between you and your tutor has a negative effect on your performance?</td>
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<td>i. you are an outsider because it is too difficult to find someone to have an academic conversation with?</td>
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<td>j. it takes a lot of time and effort to resolve any matters that arise because of the physical distance between you and your tutor?</td>
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<td>k. it is too complicated and time-consuming to resolve matters that arise between you and the HKU, and this is because of the physical distance between you and the HKU?</td>
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<td>l. matters are hard to resolve because the physical or social distance between you, your tutor and the HKU does not let you reach your full potential as a student?</td>
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</table>

Feedback and Isolation

This part explores the feelings you experience with regard to the written assignment feedback you receive and the effects of those feelings on your sense of isolation.

11. Please rate the following statements from 1 to 5: 1=very often, 2=quite often, 3=sometimes, 4=rarely, 5=never.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. The written assignment feedback I receive makes me feel I am not developing as a learner.</td>
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<td>b. The feedback I receive makes me feel good about my studies at HKU because it helps me know how I can do better.</td>
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<td>c. Written assignment feedback is useful because it gives me a clear image of what I have done well.</td>
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<td>d. I feel that any query or clarification regarding the feedback I have received is welcome.</td>
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<td>e. Written assignment feedback makes me feel good about the work I have done and confident I can overcome my weaknesses.</td>
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<td>f. When I receive written assignment feedback I feel my tutor had me in mind when they were composing it.</td>
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<td>g. I see written assignment feedback as a great chance for an academic discussion with my tutor.</td>
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<td>h. Written assignment feedback helps me become more autonomous as a learner.</td>
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<td>i. I feel that the written assignment feedback I receive is an opportunity for me to learn something new.</td>
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12. Written assignment feedback that only tells you what you have done wrong fills you with a sense of (More than one answer possible.)

Tick all that apply:
- Disappointment
- Frustration
- Lack of motivation
- Will to work harder
- Apathy
- Other
13. Written assignment feedback helps you feel part of an academic community when:
(More than one answer possible.)
- it comes in a structured document that is the same for everyone.
- it encourages sharing best practices.
- it encourages students to provide feedback on each other's work.
- it takes into account your personal qualities and builds on them.
- Other:

14. Written assignment feedback makes the distance feel greater when: (More than one answer possible.)
- it makes general comments that you cannot use to become better.
- it contains a lot of comments.
- it leaves no room for your personal contribution.
- comments refer only to what you have done wrong.
- Other:

15. In the space provided, copy and paste two authentic examples of written assignment feedback you have received which you consider helpful in sustaining a sense of community.

16. In the space provided, copy and paste two authentic examples of written assignment feedback you have received which you consider enhance alienation.

17. Please name two features of the current mode of assignment feedback provision that you think augment the isolation that Distance Learning can make you feel (e.g. the fact that it is a product of one person's perception only, that is the tutors).

18. Please name two features of the current mode of assignment feedback provision that you think temper the isolation that Distance Learning can make you feel (e.g. encouragement from tutor, "praise").

Towards a remedy
This section suggests changes that could make assignment feedback more effective than it is now in the battle against isolation.

19. Please rate the following sentences from 1-5: 1= fully agree, 2= partly agree, 3= neither agree nor disagree, 4= partly disagree, 5= fully disagree

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Written assignment feedback should be taking into account a student's previous work in the module and their background if possible.</td>
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<td>b. Written assignment feedback should not be viewed as a fixed product, unable to change, but, rather, as a dialogic process.</td>
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<td>c. It is necessary to be able to discuss the written assignment feedback with your tutor.</td>
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<td>d. Giving and receiving feedback between peers while writing an assignment is useful.</td>
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<td>e. Assignment feedback should be given by the tutor both in the staple of writing the assignment and after its submission.</td>
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<td>f. It is important that written assignment feedback should be subject to discussion and change, if necessary, so that it becomes more relevant to students and their needs.</td>
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<td>g. Written assignment feedback should encourage collaborative development.</td>
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<td>h. Allowing feedback from fellow students on an electronic platform would be useful.</td>
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20. Are there any further comments and/or suggestions you would like to make on how we can battle isolation in DL?
Despoina Maliotaki (debbie_mall@yahoo.com) graduated the University of Athens with a degree in English Studies and a specialization in Language and Linguistics. She completed her M.Ed. in TESOL at the Hellenic Open University in 2017. Her interests include Second Language Writing, Cognitive Linguistics and Education for Sustainable Development.
Peer feedback processes in Distance Education: The giver-receiver experience

Διεργασίες ανατροφοδότησης μεταξύ ομοτίμων στην εξ Αποστάσεως Εκπαίδευση: Ανατροφοδότες και ανατροφοδοτούμενοι

Anastasia GEORGOUNTZOU & Christine CALFOGLOU

The present study engages distance learning students in providing feedback on their peers’ written assignment and subsequently gauges learners’ response to this feedback. Four groups of Hellenic Open University M.Ed. TESOL learners, a total of 78 students, were divided into feedback givers and receivers and, once the feedback provision process had been completed, were presented with a questionnaire on giver or receiver perceptions respectively. More specifically, givers were asked to evaluate one written assignment produced by receivers along the lines of the criteria postulated for assignment evaluation by the tutor and to provide both in-text and end-of-text comments while both givers and receivers subsequently commented on the process. The main purpose was to see how peer feedback is perceived on both sides as well as to find out how dialogue and multiple voices resonate in peer feedback provision, possibly underpinning power relations. Students’ choices with regard to variables such as directness, form as against content, specificity and selectivity were also explored. Generally, peer feedback tended to be rather judgmental, more so than tutor feedback. The dialogic element was given prominence in students’ responses but the broader social implications of the peer feedback provision process were generally neglected.

Η παρούσα μελέτη πραγματεύεται την ανατροφοδότηση γραπτών εργασιών μεταξύ ομοτίμων, φοιτητών στο εξ Αποστάσεως Μεταπτυχιακό πρόγραμμα ειδίκευσης καθηγητών Αγγλικής του Ελληνικού Ανοικτού Πανεπιστημίου, και ανιχνεύεται τις αντιλήψεις των φοιτητών αυτών σχετικά με τη διαδικασία της γραπτής ανατροφοδότησης. 78 φοιτητές του προγράμματος, από τέσσερα τμήματα, χωρίστηκαν σε δύο ομάδες, ως ανατροφοδότες και ως αποδέκτες γραπτής ανατροφοδότησης. Μετά την ολοκλήρωση της διαδικασίας της γραπτής ανατροφοδότησης, οι δύο ομάδες συμπλήρωσαν ένα γραπτό ερωτηματολόγιο σχετικά με τις εντυπώσεις τους. Συγκεκριμένα, ζητήθηκε από τους ανατροφοδότες να
αξιολογήσουν μία γραπτή εργασία των ανατροφοδοτούμενων, σύμφωνα με τα κριτήρια αξιολόγησης που είχαν καθοριστεί από τον καθηγητή-σύμβουλο, και να παράσχουν ενδοκειμενικά και εξωκειμενικά σχόλια και, στη συνέχεια, και οι δύο πλευρές αξιολόγησαν τη διαδικασία. Κύριος στόχος ήταν η διερεύνηση της πρόσληψης της ανατροφοδότησης και από τις δύο πλευρές καθώς επίσης και του διαλογικού στοιχείου αλλά και των πολλαπλών φωνών στη διαδικασία ανατροφοδότησης μεταξύ ομοτίμων και των σχέσεων εξουσίας που εμπλέκονται στη διαδικασία αυτή. Διερευνήθηκαν επίσης οι επιλογές των ανατροφοδοτών ως προς την αμεσότητα, τη νεστίαση στη μορφή εκείνη του καθηγητή-συμβούλου.

Keywords: open/distance learning, peer feedback, feedback givers/receivers, academic assignments, dialogue

1. Introduction

Feedback, the provision of different types of commentary, or else, what is widely known as reacting to any visual, oral or written stimulus, is vital in any interaction. In the context of language teaching in particular, the educational process is considered to be incomplete without teachers’ effective feedback on their students’ oral or written performance (Chokwe, 2015). While in teaching practice feedback provision has generally been associated with an all-powerful teacher voice, learner autonomy perspectives (e.g. Tsagari, present volume) have sought alternative ways of providing feedback, dominant among which has been that of collaborative, peer feedback (see Ferris, 2003; Lee, 2017; Yu & Lee, 2016 for a review of the literature). In Higher Education contexts, peer feedback has been viewed as one of the three ingredients of an effective mix, along with teacher feedback and guided self-evaluation (Ferris, 2003, p. 176) and has been associated with awareness-heightening and self-management (Liu & Carless, 2006) as well as with “encouraging students’ sharing of judgements” (Carless & Boud, 2018, p. 3) while the evaluation and judgement higher order thinking element that forms part of such feedback is also underscored in Nicol, Thomson & Breslin (2014). The need to dissociate it from grading and peer assessment has also been pointed to (Kaufman & Schunn, 2011; Liu & Carless, 2006; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Nicol, 2013). In Distance Learning (henceforth DL), in particular, research has explored peer feedback as related to scaffolding learning through peer support (McLoughlin, 2002), the use of social media and self-regulation (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012), the online learning and feedback provision mode and the corresponding cognitive processes employed (van Popta et al., 2017). The benefits accruing to givers as against receivers have been rather marginally considered (see also Narciss, 2013), however, and, in the not many studies available, it is mostly one of the two sides that has been explored (see discussion in van Popta et al., 2017).

In this article, we explore peer feedback giver-receiver perceptions and practices further by looking closely at Hellenic Open University (HOU) TESOL post-graduate DL students’ response to it, when half of them assume the role of feedback givers and the other half that
of receivers (Triantafyllopoulou, 2015). In doing so, we wish to identify similarities and/or differences between the two sides as well as collect further evidence in favour of such alternative forms of feedback provision in Distance Education (henceforth DE) as, among other things, a means of strengthening student bonds, much needed in the solitary process of DL, by promoting feedback as a dialogue and helping develop an active peer network.

The article is organised as follows: We first discuss peer feedback in the context of Higher Education and DL in more general terms and, then, we go on to discuss specific aspects of feedback we will be focussing on in our peer feedback research. Our third section presents our methodological choices while in section 4 we present and analyse our data and in the final section we raise some more general issues for discussion.

2. The theoretical background

2.1. Peer feedback in DL: The ‘macro’ image

If, following Carless & Boud (2018), we define feedback as “a process through which learners make sense of information from various sources and use it to enhance their work or learning strategies” (p.1), it appears that the main or only source available to distance learners to date is the teacher/tutor, a source of experienced ‘reader-based prose’ (Flower, 1979). Building on prior definitions (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Carless, 2015), however, this delimitation of feedback “goes beyond notions that feedback is principally about teachers informing students about strengths, weaknesses and how to improve, and highlights the centrality of the student role in sense-making and using comments to improve subsequent work” (Carless & Boud, 2018, p.1). If feedback provision is a polyphonic process, also drawing on fellow-learners’ less experienced prose, peer feedback may well form a vibrant alternative to teacher-driven comments and further highlight “the centrality of the student role”.

The concept of peer feedback, also known as ‘peer response’, ‘peer editing’, ‘peer critiquing’ and ‘peer evaluation’ (Keh, 1990), is theoretically driven by the Vygotskian (1978) idea of learning through social interaction. As argued in Villamil & Guerrero (1998, p. 495), peer feedback is “a favourable instructional environment for readers and writers to work within their respective ( . . . ) ZPD2”, that is the area in-between what they can do individually and what they can accomplish when scaffolded by others, be they adults or peers.3 In other words, a collaborative setting can help resolve a number of problems that could not be resolved otherwise. Within a similar perspective, Activity Theory (see, among others, Yu & Lee, 2014, 2015), which views learning as a mediated, goal-oriented activity, also underlies the peer feedback philosophy (see Yu & Lee, 2016 for a comprehensive discussion). Moreover, if writing is socially underpinned (see, e.g., Lillis, 2013), feedback, as a key component of the writing process, may need to follow suit and thus be constructed collaboratively. In this way, the teacher-learner dyad can be varied through the introduction of the peer-peer one.

Rooted in the concept of peer feedback is the idea of dialogue. Referring to the critical role of feedback generally in the chain of learning, Shale and Garrison (1990, p.29) point out that,  

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1 It should be noted that both of these sources refer to a non-DL context.
2 Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978).
3 Vygotsky (1978, p. 86) actually refers to “more capable peers” but, though we are advised to prepare “pairs or groups thoughtfully” (Ferris, 2003, p. 170), research has also pointed to benefits gained through randomness and alternating patterns.
in its absence, instruction may be like “passing on content as if it were dogmatic truth, and the cycle of knowledge acquisition, critical evaluation and knowledge validation that is important for the development of higher order thinking skills is nonexistent”. The dialogue established through peer interaction may thus be treated as one more step towards battling dogmatic truth. Besides the cognitive aspect, however, we also need to underline the emotional one, that of making up for the feeling of isolation particularly pertinent to DL studies. Talking about feedback generally, Vrasidas & Glass (2002, p.43) suggest that it “is more important than just a mechanism for informing the student on how well he or she did in an assignment” and invoke studies indicating that “the lack of immediate feedback in online classes contributed to the feeling of isolation among students”. This means that we need to seek ways of palliating the sense of isolation which so distinctly characterizes distance learners in particular and peer feedback is one of them (Ertmer et al., 2007).

The role of dialogic feedback is highlighted in several studies. Blair & McGinty (2012), for instance, speak of the significance of a collaborative discussion between the instructor and the student over the feedback provided (see also Macklin, 2016), Malliotaki (present volume) underscores the importance of teacher-student dialogic feedback as a means of battling ‘transactional distance’ in DL (Moore, 1991, 1993). Calfoglou (2010) refers to written feedback – again in DL -- as an interpersonal act, negotiating and redesigning the meaning designed by the student-writer, while Steen-Utheim & Wittek (2017) operationalize dialogic feedback practices and propose four student potentialities as arising from such feedback, of which we retain ‘emotional and relational support’ as well as ‘the other’s contribution to individual growth’ as most relevant to our present research. We have therefore witnessed a growing interest in the multiple voices acting as co-determinants of the feedback process and this has also led to questioning the power relations at work as well as to proposing ways of minimizing their presence or, in other words, of doing away with the so-called ‘asymmetries of power’ (Sutton, 2011, p. 48; see also Yang & Carless, 2013). In the next subsection we go over peer feedback studies, focusing on peer feedback efficacy and the giver-receiver pair.

### 2.2. The effectiveness of peer feedback

The effectiveness of peer feedback has been explored in a number of studies. Ferris (2003) provides a comprehensive taxonomy of related studies (see references therein) and sums up the gains suggested by referring to a number of benefits, among which “confidence, perspective and critical thinking skills”, the “diverse audience” and “build(ing) a sense of ( ) community” (p. 70; see also Ferris, 2010, 2011, 2012; Bitchener & Ferris, 2013). Liu & Carless (2006) emphasise its importance as an academic and professional skill, while Flower et al. (1986) argue that peer review in academic writing stimulates a problem solving situation and triggers action to be taken by the peer-evaluator, who becomes more experienced and reflective (see also van Popta et al., 2017). In their review of the effectiveness of peer feedback practices in their state-of-the-art article,Yu & Lee (2016) point to the emerging significance of combining peer feedback with teacher and self-feedback (Matsuno, 2007; Suzuki, 2008; Birjandi & Tamjid, 2012; Lam, 2013).

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4 Moore (1991) defines transactional distance as “a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of the instructor and those of the learner” (p. 3).

5 The power dimension of feedback as a component of writing practices falls within the framework of writing as a sociolinguistic act (see Lillis, 2013).
On the whole, however, despite the several instances of positive reception, peer feedback is not free of problems. Ferris (2003) refers to learners’ mistrust of their fellow-learners in the sense of their not being competent, “either in their grasp of the language or their writing skills, to give them useful feedback. ( ) “Students”, she adds, “are also concerned that peers might be unkind or harsh in their criticism and worry both about having their feelings hurt or about losing face” (p.165; see also, i.a., Bijami et al., 2013; Davies, 2007; de Guerrero de & Villamil, 1994; Liu & Carless, 2006; Nelson & Murphy, 1992; Pishghadam & Kermanshahi, 2011; Saito & Fujita, 2004). In proposing peer feedback training, Ferris (2003) talks about “potential problems with social roles and cross-cultural dynamics within pairs or groups of peer reviewers” (p. 164). So, despite the potential gains in relation to power asymmetries referred to in the previous section, it appears that there might be power forces at work between feedback givers and receivers, for instance, even, we would suggest, within a single culture, in the sense of the individual ‘cultural dynamics’ each learner possesses. In discussing learner-friendly teacher feedback, Calfoglou (2010) argues that “written feedback and the corresponding rhetoric (see Straub, 1996) can act as a power booster, minimising interaction between learners and teachers, or, alternatively, question power relations through interaction maximisation” (p. 196). Yet could peer feedback be viewed as an implementation of ‘interaction maximisation’ par excellence? This may be related to peers’ motives and stances (see, e.g., Yu & Lee, 2015). Yu’s (2014) study, for instance, “showed that EFL university students with motives focusing on feedback giving or the learning process of peer feedback tend to take a collaborative stance during peer feedback” (in Yu & Lee, 2016, p. 474).

It has also been suggested that peers tend to focus more on local issues, like grammar and mechanics, for instance, than global ones, involving content or organization (see, among others, Alnasser, 2013; Hyland, 2016, Keh, 1990). In other words, there are both pink and gray areas in peer feedback. Zhao (2015), for instance, demonstrates that “learners provided significantly smaller amount of and less varied feedback than their tutor and they used significantly less peer than teacher feedback in their revised drafts”, while, on the other hand, they “valued peer assessment in terms of its complementary role to teacher assessment and its distinguishable role from teacher assessment” (p. 231). The losses in one respect are counterbalanced by the gains in another, so further researching of peer feedback related parameters seems imperative. This need gains further support from the belief that, as Triantafyllopoulou (2015, p. 26) puts it, ‘feedback should be viewed as a mediating tool, promoting change in learners’ cognition and not aiming at a specific result, as its purpose is to “map the transformation of understanding” (Mustafa, 2012, p. 4)’.

With regard to the relative gains earned by each of the two members of the giver.receiver pair, focal in the present study, givers are generally treated as favoured more than receivers but there has also been some controversy. On the one hand, peer reviewers have been found to have become more competent writers (Cho & Mac Arthur, 2011; Greenberg, 2015). Lundstrom & Baker (2009) attempted a direct comparison between feedback givers’ (i.e., evaluators) and feedback receivers’ writing performance and found that givers outperformed receivers’ writing competence. Other studies have revealed that peer graders consider offering feedback more beneficial than receiving feedback (Ludemann & McMakin, 2014; McConlogue, 2015). Triantafyllopoulou (2015), by contrast, adduces evidence in favour of receiver benefits in writing, especially on the organizational level, and connects gains with student level (cf. Nelson & Murphy, 1992). On the other hand, however, Huisman

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6 Triantafyllopoulou’s (2015) study involves secondary education schoolers.
et al. (2018) revealed that givers’ and receivers’ writing performance was similar in the context of an authentic process writing task while perceived peer feedback effects on aspects of content, structure and style were also found to be equally adequate. Interestingly, the same study also pointed to the salient role of explanatory comments during the peer evaluation process, a point we will also be considering in the present study.

As already noted in the previous section, peer feedback may be even more potent in online learning (Lynch, 2002; Palloff & Pratt, 2001), making up for the lack of constant face-to-face interaction among students and the tutor. Online peer feedback has also been found to improve the quality of discourse (Ertmer et al., 2007), and, eventually, distance learners’ quality of learning. Sorensen & Takle (2005) and Vonderwell et al. (2007) consider formative peer feedback to be one of the main contributors of interactivity and collaboration in DL, as online peers are engaged in dynamic interactions during the giving and receiving feedback process. Moreover, Preece (2000) singles out important collaborative qualities in online communities such as the idea of ‘sharing’ (goals, resources, and policies). With regard to the gains differential for givers and receivers, however, contrary to the views above favouring feedback givers in conventional education, most studies on peer feedback in DL (e.g., Guardado & Shi, 2007; Smits et al., 2008) stress receivers’ benefits (but see Narciss, 2013). Considering the complexity of online written peer feedback provision (Dochy, Segers & Suijsmans, 1999; Topping et al., 2000), due to the advanced cognitive and metacognitive academic skills required – but also, interestingly, progressively improved through peer feedback practice – as well as the fact that it is an under-researched component of DL, it becomes evident that further exploration would be more than welcome.

2.3. Feedback-related issues involved in providing peer feedback: The ‘micro’ image

The constructiveness of feedback referred to in the previous section may partly be determined by its form. Thus, as suggested in Straub (1997), college student writers were appreciative of comments that praised the strengths of their work but resented uncouthly judgemental and authoritarian teacher comments. It appears, then, that phrasing one’s response to student writing in a way that demonstrates overt control is particularly unwelcome. We have already referred to studies underlining learners’ negative stance towards judgemental peer comments. One aspect of feedback which we would see as connected with a judgemental and overbearing attitude is directness. Unlike overt correction, indicating the problem in the student’s text and guiding them to corrective action, overt teacher correction with no mitigators, that is downtoners, lexical items alleviating the effect of correction (see Hyland, 1998), seems to be dispreferred in DL (Calfoglou, 2010). The issue of mitigation – and praise – has been discussed extensively in the literature and research findings have been inconclusive, some studies recommending its use (see, e.g., Cho et al., 2006; Nilson, 2003; Saddler & Adrade, 2004) and some others drawing attention to its confusing, misinterpretation impact (Ferris, 1997, 2003, present volume; Hayes & Daiker, 1984; Mantello, 1997; Zamel, 1985; see also discussion in Hattie & Timperley, 2007). It has also been argued (Hyland, 1998; Hyland & Hyland, 2001), that such feedback misinterpretation may be even more intense in the absence of face-to-face contact in DL. On the whole, however, indirect feedback has been hailed as producing more lasting effects (Ferris, 2011; Hendrickson, 1980; Jamalinesari et al., 2015; Lalande, 1982; see also Kung & Scholer, 2018; Lee, 2004, 2008; Triantafyllopoulou, 2015), encouraging the development of learners’ self-correction strategies (Noroozizadeh, 2009). It would thus be interesting to see if peers opt for the overt or the covert end of the directness-indirectness continuum in providing feedback as well as how this is perceived by feedback receivers. We would assume that, if learners view themselves as ‘involved readers’ in the feedback
provision process, this might be yet another sign of indirectness and point to the affective, empathising element in ‘motivational (peer) feedback’ (Pyke & Sherlock, 2010, p. 111).

Yet another parameter that might hinge on the impact of feedback generally and peer feedback in particular is the degree to which learners focus on content or form in their peers’ writing as well as the specificity of the comments provided. In the previous section we referred to the increased incidence of local error correction in peer feedback studies. By contrast, Yu & Lee (2016) review several other studies (e.g. Chen, 2010; Xu & Liu, 2010) demonstrating that peers tended to focus on more global, content, higher-order issues in their feedback than teachers. Moreover, specificity in feedback provision, namely identifying the problem and its location and providing clear improvement suggestions, has been found to make feedback easier to implement (Ferris, 1997, Matsumura et al., 2002; Nelson & Schunn, 2008; see also, Huisman et al., 2018). Peer use of specific comments could also therefore be hypothesized to be welcomed by feedback receivers.

Finally, a key consideration especially in DL written feedback provision is the degree to which deviance is dealt with comprehensively or selectively. The importance of selective correction has been pointed to in a number of studies (see, among others, Ferris, 2003, present volume; Hargreaves, 2013; Lee, 2003, 2004; Tsagari, present volume; on selective as against exhaustive tutor correction practices in DL see Karagianni, present volume). According to Ferris (2002), error feedback may be most effective “when it focuses on patterns of error, allowing teachers and students to attend to, say, two or three major error types at a time, rather than dozens of disparate errors” (p. 50). In a DL context, however, where feedback opportunities are scarce, the choice between selectivity and comprehensiveness may be even harder. It is therefore interesting to see in favour of which peer feedback givers decide and whether they follow their tutor’s pattern in doing so.

The overall assumption with regard to the above variables is that the specific value assigned to them in peer feedback may contribute to receivers’ positive response and, consequently, to their active engagement with it.

3. The Study

3.1. The context

Drawing on research exploring peer feedback givers and receivers (see 2.2. above), the present study deals with DL HOU M.Ed. TESOL students acting as either feedback providers or as feedback receivers in relation to a written assignment composed within the framework of their first course module.7 The specific assignment had been preceded by another two, on which the tutors had provided extensive written feedback, of both the in-text and the end-of-text type, the latter in the form of an evaluation report involving specific content- and form-focussed criteria, namely ‘rationale and analysis’, ‘use of literature’, ‘application of principles to practice’, ‘organisation and structure’ and ‘presentation and language’. The evaluation sheet also included a grade for each of these criteria as well as a grade total. The selection of an assignment following another two was made on the basis of the fact that students would no longer be ‘novices’ and would have experienced tutor feedback provision, which, it was expected, would help them feel more self-sufficient in providing

7 The specific module involved the teaching of Oracy and Literacy in the English as an International Language class and the specific assignment chosen for the purposes of the present study was the third in a row and focussed on literacy and, more specifically, reading instruction.
feedback and probably allow them to develop their own profile in providing feedback on their peers’ written assignments as well as to see the benefits or drawbacks of peer in relation to tutor feedback. Peer feedback preceded tutor evaluation of the specific assignment.

3.2. The research objectives

Our overall aim in setting up the specific research was to see how feedback is provided by peers in the DL context and how it is received. More specifically, we wanted to explore the quality of the ‘voice’ uttered by peers in the feedback provision process, the degree to which it may differ from or conflict with that of the tutor, as well as how this voice is perceived by feedback givers themselves as well as by feedback receivers. Thus, the questions we postulated were as follows:

- What are peer feedback givers’ and receivers’ perceptions with regard to the peer feedback provision process generally? Do these perceptions converge? What are the roles assumed by feedback providers?
- What is the mode of peer feedback in terms of directness, form vs content focus, specificity and selectivity?

3.3. The Method

3.3.1 The Participants

A total of 78 students from two different groups in the same module over two consecutive years were divided into feedback and receivers, 39 each. The role of feedback giver or receiver was assigned on the basis of random probability sampling (Cohen et al., 2011) to avoid student performance bias. Participants had been informed about the process and had consented to their participation in the study. The process was performed anonymously.

3.3.2 Tools and procedure

The tools employed in the study were the actual assignment in-text evaluation, the evaluation report also completed by the tutor for each assignment, two questionnaires, one addressed to the feedback givers and one to the feedback receivers. Clarifications with regard to the evaluation criteria were also provided. Students had their peer’s assignment e-mailed to them and were asked to e-mail it back to the tutors-researchers, after having provided in-text comments and completed the evaluation report, also giving a grade for each criterion as well as a mean total. Marking ranged from 1 to 10. Both the in-text feedback and the evaluation sheet were subsequently forwarded to the receiver involved. On completion of the first part of the process, both givers and receivers were sent a questionnaire, adapted to the giver or receiver role of each group of participants, which recorded their perception of the process and of the feedback given or received. The whole process was pilot tested and any fine-tuning needed in the form of further clarifications of the evaluation criteria or the clarity with which some questions were phrased was done. Besides addressing our research questions, the joint use of assignment comments and evaluation on the one hand and questionnaire data on the other aimed at triangulating the study findings (Smith & Kleine, 1986; Taber, 2008), checking for instances where peers’
articulation of their role in the process, for example, might be belied by the actual correction practices they adopted.

More specifically, the giver questionnaire consisted of 16 questions, all of which were closed-ended, except 2, which involved further comments and improvement perspectives, and another 4, which aimed at further elaboration of the preceding question.\(^9\) 7 of the closed-ended items were multiple response sets, 1 was a 5-point Likert scale and the remaining 8 were multiple-choice ones. As regards question content, 12 items explored providers’ attitude and perceptions about the process while another 4 focused on the feedback micro-issues researched in our second question.\(^10\)

The questionnaire addressed to receivers was composed of 18 questions, all of which were closed-ended, except the last two, which requested further comments on the process as well as ways of improving it, and another four items accompanying closed-ended questions and involving further elaboration of the corresponding closed-ended response preceding each of them.\(^11\) Of the closed-ended questions, 7 were multiple response sets, 5 were 5-point Likert scale items and the remaining 4 were multiple-choice ones. With regard to question content, 11 items addressed receivers’ perceptions with regard to the peer feedback process and the role they felt their peer adopted while another 7 items referred to the micro-level issues addressed in our second research question. Perceptions involved how interesting or helpful and so on they found the feedback received, the anonymity issue, their reaction to the feedback, the role they believed their peer adopted, the potential benefits of the feedback received, whether they would like to repeat the process and in which capacity, that is, as givers or receivers, their perception of peer feedback in DL, further comments and proposals.

The quantitative questionnaire data was entered on SPSS and descriptive analysis was performed. Peer comments were also codified in terms of directness, form or content focus, specificity and selectivity. The discussion that follows thus combines quantitative and qualitative question findings with peers’ actual in-text comments and evaluation report.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Perception data: The ‘macro’-image

4.1.1. Feedback receivers

Questionnaire data gave us valuable insight into both givers’ and receivers’ perceptions with regard to the peer feedback process they went through in the present study. In the case of receivers, their choices in relation to whether they found their colleague’s feedback helpful, interesting and so on varied along the spectrum, with 40% opting for ‘interesting’, 20% for ‘helpful’, 18.2% for straightforward, 7.3% for demanding and, most interestingly, a 10.9% opting for ‘unhelpful’. This suggests that some of the peer feedback receivers felt they did

\(^9\) These four items were not included in the number of questions provided and were coded as 9a, 10a and so on. If they are counted in, the question total goes up to 20.

\(^10\) Items 3 and 6 were mistakenly treated by participants as multiple response sets, so they have been excluded from the discussion that follows.

\(^11\) As in the case of the giver questionnaire, these four items were not included in the number of questions provided and were coded as 3a, 5a and so on. If they are counted in, the question total goes up to 23.
not benefit from the process. Their response to the second, Likert scale, question, as we can see in Table 1 below, corroborates this negativity, since the median is 3, namely ‘quite’. Besides the 48.7% who chose ‘quite’, there was a robust 25.6% of responses favouring ‘not much’. Receivers therefore appear to be quite reserved about the effectiveness of the process:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>Valid</th>
<th>39</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>3.0000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. “Will the feedback I received from my colleague help me see which areas I need to study more?”

What could be responsible for receivers’ moderate response to peer feedback? Their stance on the anonymity of the peer feedback provider is generally favourable, though there is a total of 34.6% who would either like the process not to have been anonymous or, mostly, who appear to be rather sceptical about the benefits of anonymity. Interestingly, when asked to account for their answer, one of the respondents came up with “being anonymous does not necessarily promote careful and responsible evaluation of an assignment. Knowledge of the names could establish a higher level of responsibility and trust among colleagues and allow more space for feedback and exchange of ideas”, which echoed other respondents’ views, too.

Further light could be shed on receivers’ reserves by considering their first reaction to their colleague’s feedback. As we can see in Table 2 below, their responses are quite revealing, since there was both a 22.5% total of negativity and an opaque 37.5% of ‘Other’ answers left unexplained.

We can therefore see that, once again, receivers’ enthusiasm was tempered. To explore this negativity further, we asked them an open-ended question about how their reaction to their colleague’s feedback compares with the one to their tutor’s. Though the differences reported upon were not so substantial, there was a dominant feeling that peer feedback could have been more encouraging as well as that it might not be as trustworthy as the tutor’s. One respondent reported: “Tutor comments include some positive feedback as well, which totally boosts my confidence. Sometimes, the negative comments on my performance are written in a motivating way, encouraging self-reflection.” So, it appears that peer feedback might not have been so favourably received largely because of its lack of encouragement. In section 4.2 below, we will go into this point in some more detail.

Perhaps the most apocalyptic element in receivers’ attitude towards the process is their perception of their colleague’s role in providing feedback on their work. As we can see in Table 3 below, the percentage of receivers perceiving the provider’s role as one of ‘an involved reader’ or ‘a sympathetic peer’ was almost counterbalanced by that of receivers interpreting the giver’s role as one of a ‘distanced’ or an ‘all-powerful’ feedback provider – 50% and 45.8% respectively. And, while the role of a sympathetic peer might add a touch of untrustworthiness to the process, opting for the distanced or the all-powerful provider characterization underlines the negativity.
Receivers’ attitude towards their colleague’s feedback is also reflected in their responses to the question on how they believe obtaining peer feedback will benefit them. Table 4 below records these responses. We can see that the second option, “it will help me in my next assignment writing”, along with the third, namely “it will make me develop a better understanding of problem areas in assignment writing”, which would have demonstrated a strong impact of peer feedback on the immediate goal of writing better assignments receives moderate support. This further validates students’ reply to the question of whether the feedback received will help them see which areas they need to study more, which we talked about earlier in this section. Also, though the answers are more or less evenly distributed over the options provided, it appears that the benefits perceived are mostly in relation to the self rather than to the interaction of the self with the ‘other’, as indicated in “it will help me become a better editor of my own work”. The cultural dimension of these findings is discussed in the next section.
Table 4. How do you think obtaining feedback from your colleague will benefit you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How will peer feedback benefit you?</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Percent of Cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It will make me more reflective</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>41,0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will help me in my next assignment writing</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20,5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will help me develop a better understanding of problem areas in assignment writing</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>33,3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will make me more understanding with regard to my tutor’s demanding task of evaluation</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>33,3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will make me read my tutor’s comments more attentively</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>30,8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will make me think of my audience more when I write</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>41,0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will help me become a better editor of my own work</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>51,3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will help me reflect on the process of providing feedback on my students’ writing</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>43,6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7,7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>118</td>
<td>100,0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1.

Further evidence concerning receivers’ stance with regard to the peer feedback provision process can be derived from their reply to the question of whether they would like to repeat the process as well as whether they would then select the giving or the receiving end. As can be seen in Table 5 below, the median for the 5-point Likert scale question was, once again, 3 (quite), which indicates no particular zest. Besides the 53.8% of the respondents, who opted for ‘quite’, none chose ‘absolutely’, while ‘a lot’ and ‘not much’ were equally represented by 23.1%. Interestingly, if they were to repeat the process, most would like to be either givers or receivers:
Table 5. “Would you like to repeat the process?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Valid</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>39</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>3,0000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. “If the process was to be repeated, I would like to be ...”

As noted by one of the respondents opting for either role, “receiving feedback helps gain better understanding of the reader’s expectations while giving feedback gives me the chance to read my colleague’s assignments and compare them to mine and help me get an understanding of the application of marking criteria.” On the other hand, those favouring the receiving over the giving role accounted for their choice to this effect: “I chose the receiver end because, when I provide feedback, I’m really concerned about not hurting the receiver’s feelings and this is stressful.” We therefore see that learners are aware of the emotional implications of feedback provision.

Finally, in describing how they see the peer feedback process in DL generally, receivers highlight the dialogic relationship benefits of the experience, though this preference does not seem to correlate with more solid social bonding, in the form of networking or a tighter community of practice. The dialogic relationship idea was followed by that of a larger audience and multiplicity of voices in the writing process as well as by that of improving participants’ reading and writing skills. We could therefore argue that DL peer feedback receivers – and, perhaps, distance learners generally – are mostly oriented towards narrower focus benefits rather than showing concern over the broadening of the social aspect of the DL experience generally. It might also have been expected that peer feedback would be treated as a means of battling isolation in DL (cf. Malliotaki, present volume) but this does not seem to be the case.
Table 7. “How do you see the peer feedback process in distance learning?” Receivers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How do you see peer feedback in DL?</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Percent of Cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>as an opportunity to enhance networking among students, strengthening the bonds among them</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3,0% 7,7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as a means of creating a tighter community of practice, with its own goals and routine</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11,0% 28,2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as a way of enlarging distance learning students' audience and creating a multiplicity of voices in the writing process</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19,0% 48,7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as a dialogic relationship enriching students' experience</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>31,0% 79,5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as a way of fighting the distance learner's loneliness and creating a stronger sense of belonging</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4,0% 10,3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as a means of error defocusing, that is, of treating errors as less 'sacrosanct'</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4,0% 10,3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as an enhancement of the tutor's feedback</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8,0% 20,5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as a means of improving participants' reading and writing skills</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18,0% 46,2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as a means of tutor defocusing, that is of treating the tutor's feedback as less 'unique' and, therefore, as less intimidating</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1,0% 2,6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1,0% 2,6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100,0% 256,4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1.

As for the additional comments respondents made in relation to their experience, some said it was interesting and helpful while some others thought it was not particularly helpful, as “they could see the effort behind it” or they felt demotivated by the feedback provided. These comments, when available, lent further support to the points raised in the rest of the data concerning peer feedback as some kind of a mixed blessing. Finally, in their improvement suggestions, receivers pointed to the need for training. Here is the proposal made by a particular student, which also reflects the general attitude, however: “Perhaps those with a greater academic background and teaching experience should be playing the
role of the evaluator first so that the others can become better acquainted with the procedure and then they can swap roles.\footnote{12}

### 4.1.2 Feedback givers

In the case of feedback givers, responses to whether they found the feedback providing process helpful, interesting and so on were somewhat less varied than those of their receiver counterparts. 36% of the feedback providers found the feedback giving process ‘interesting’, 29.9% found it ‘helpful’ and 28.1% thought it was ‘demanding’ while only 5.6% found it ‘straightforward’. What most of them seem to have enjoyed in the process is “hearing a voice other than theirs and seeing a somewhat different viewpoint”, though “reading a colleague’s assignment and comparing it with theirs” along with “becoming a colleague’s audience” also emerged as potent options:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Percent of Cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>23,2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>35,8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>20,0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>17,9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3,2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95</td>
<td>100,0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What I enjoyed was ...</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Percent of Cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>reading a colleague's assignment and comparing it with mine</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>23,2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hearing a ‘voice’ other than mine and seeing a somewhat different viewpoint</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>35,8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>becoming a colleague’s audience and imagining the effect my assignment would have on a peer</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20,0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>deciding what and how to correct</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17,9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3,2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8. What did you enjoy in the feedback providing process?

It therefore appears that the polyphonic element in the peer provision process is tempting and that its mediation in the learning process is welcome. To check on respondents’ consistency in their responses as well as to see whether further support for this attitude is available, it would be interesting to compare these findings with those obtained on how givers think the feedback providing process might benefit them. The results can be seen in Table 9 below:

\footnote{12} Time constraints were also referred to while another suggestion involved the same assignment being corrected by several peers.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How will providing feedback benefit you?</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Percent of Cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It will make me more reflective</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>18,1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will help me in my next assignment writing</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10,9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will help me develop a better understanding of problem areas in assignment writing</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15,2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will make me more understanding with regard to my tutor’s demanding task of evaluation</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11,6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will make me read my tutor’s comments more attentively</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5,8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will make me think of my audience more when I write</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11,6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will help me become a better editor of my own work</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>19,6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will help me reflect on the process of providing feedback on my students’ writing</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7,2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>138</td>
<td>100,0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percent</strong></td>
<td>353,8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 9. How do you think the feedback providing process might benefit you?*

Though, as in the case of receivers, the relevance of peer feedback provision on assignment writing may not be respondents’ prime concern, developing an understanding of problem areas in assignment writing exhibits a relatively high frequency. This may suggest that the metacognitive element in the feedback giving process helps them clarify dark areas in compiling an assignment. What may be most noteworthy, however, is that, like receivers, and even more so, givers opt for benefits related to the self, as in ‘it will help me become a better editor of my own work’ or ‘it will make me more reflective’, rather than to the ‘other’, their tutor or their students. This would seem to curb the polyphonic process attitude referred to above.

On the other hand, however, their overall perception of peer feedback in DL once again primes the dialogic element underlined in receivers’ view while the multiplicity of voices idea along with literacy development follow. Thus, though the tighter community of practice option appears more frequently than in the case of receivers, we could once again argue that, generally, the broader social liaison idea is dispreferred:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How do you see peer feedback in DL?</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Percent of Cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>as an opportunity to enhance networking among students, strengthening the bonds among them</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7,8%</td>
<td>20,5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as a means of creating a tighter community of practice, with its own goals and routine</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11,8%</td>
<td>30,8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as a way of enlarging distance learning students’ audience and creating a multiplicity of voices in the writing process</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14,7%</td>
<td>38,5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as a dialogic relationship enriching students' experience</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>24,5%</td>
<td>64,1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as a way of fighting the distance learner's loneliness and creating a stronger sense of belonging</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7,8%</td>
<td>20,5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as a means of error defocusing, that is, of treating errors as less 'sacrosanct'</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6,9%</td>
<td>17,9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as an enhancement of the tutor’s feedback</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2,0%</td>
<td>5,1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as a means of improving participants’ reading and writing skills</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15,7%</td>
<td>41,0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as a means of tutor defocusing, that is of treating the tutor’s feedback as less 'unique' and, therefore, as less intimidating</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8,8%</td>
<td>23,1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>100,0%</td>
<td>261,5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10. How do you see the peer feedback process in distance learning? Givers.

Givers’ attitude towards the feedback provision process is further demonstrated through their response to whether they would like to repeat the process, the median being 3, as in the case of receivers, namely the ‘quite’ option on the 5-point Likert scale. Moreover, if they were to repeat the process, they would rather be on either the giving or the receiving end (53.8%) or on the receiving end alone (35.9%). Very few chose the feedback giving end alone. As the respondents themselves explained, “being on both ends would give them a full understanding of the process. Being a feedback giver puts you in the place of the reader and helps you understand how important it is for one to get their message across to their
readers. On the other hand, being a feedback receiver would mean being evaluated on how successful you are in doing what you expect others to do. Being evaluated by another colleague has to be interesting, because they can relate to assignment writing/reading and provide accurate feedback.”

Further comments on the process pointed to its being interesting, though stressful and demanding, as well as to the need for further preparation, systematicity and replication of the process: “I would have felt more comfortable if it was a routine process and not a once-in-a-while experience”. The suggestion concerning more experienced students becoming givers, which was also made by receivers, was repeated while a number of respondents expressed the need for feedback on their feedback, as this would give them a sense of certainty. Overall, it appears that feedback givers are more positive about the experience than receivers.

Finally, as regards the role they believe they assumed when providing feedback, givers see themselves mostly as ‘involved readers’ and, then, as ‘sympathetic peers’ and much less as ‘distanced feedback providers’, as can be seen in Table 11:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How did you act when providing feedback?</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Percent of Cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>as an involved reader</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>44,6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as a distanced feedback provider</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16,9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as a sympathetic peer</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>26,2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as an all-powerful feedback provider</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6,2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6,2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>100,0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1.

Table 11. Which of the following best represent(s) the way you acted when providing feedback on your colleague’s assignment?

These findings conflict quite strongly with those obtained from receivers, who, as illustrated in the previous subsection, view their feedback providers as ‘all-powerful’ and ‘distanced’ with greater frequency. This difference in the two groups’ perception of givers’ role underlines the presence of power forces at work in peer feedback processes.

4.2. Perception data: The ‘micro’-image

In the subsections that follow we will present our findings with regard to the actual mode of peer correction. As we will be addressing our second research question, our discussion will focus on directness, form as against content focus, specificity and selectivity.
4.2.1. Directness and specificity

As regards directness, the majority of our feedback receivers felt their colleague performed either covert (46.2%) or both overt and covert (41.0%) correction. Further probing of giver reports and in-text comments in particular done by the researchers revealed that, though the overall image was quite varied, form-related errors were mostly corrected directly and that covertness was mostly reserved for content-related errors. In commenting on the specific mode of correction employed by their colleague, receivers generally treated the covert form of correction as more helpful and constructive as well as less threatening: “Crossing out the mistakes would be a rather aggressive form of evaluation. On the other hand, suggesting ways of improving is more realistic than writing down all the right points for each mistake. It’s helpful to explain why something is wrong and guide somebody to look for the correct answers in the right ‘place’”.

This, however, does not seem to fully portray what happens with peer feedback directness properties. Going back to Table 3, we can see that the giver’s role was often perceived by receivers as not that of ‘an involved reader’ but as that of a ‘distanced’ or ‘all-powerful’ feedback provider, which, as suggested in section 2.3, means that they felt somehow ‘threatened’. Indeed, close inspection of the language used by feedback providers in their comments indicates both the presence of mitigation and tentativeness in a number of instances – e.g. ‘a bit awkward’, ‘I would say’, ‘maybe you should’, ‘it would be better if’ – and complete absence of mitigation and harsh evaluative phrases, such as ‘very conventional’, ‘crammed introduction’. ‘too simple’, along with a number of imperatives. This could account for the reserves and dissatisfaction voiced by some of the receivers.13

Let us now see how givers themselves perceived their correction mode in terms of directness. Though their responses did not differ much from those of receivers, it is interesting to note that they treated their feedback as overt even less often as well as that they thought they had engaged in a combined mode of correction more often (48.7%). This may point to the need for further awareness-raising. On the other hand, however, some giver comments on their correction mode suggest striking awareness of the implications of overt or covert correction: “I think covert correction is more helpful and challenging, since it encourages critical thinking without discouraging the receiver”, “My intention was to encourage deeper reflection upon mistakes, so I avoided judgmental comments”.

The use of constructive comments inviting peers to reflect on what they have written also raises the issue of specificity. As we saw in section 2.3, specific comments are generally very welcome. According to receivers, their peers addressed specific features of their work ‘quite often’ (Median=3 on a 5-point Likert scale) while they included specific suggestions on how to improve problem areas in their work, that is forward-looking feedback, also ‘quite often (Median=3 on a 5-point Likert scale). These findings are also generally borne out by closer inspection of the actual feedback provided and might be an indication, among all else, of feedback providers imitating their tutor’s correction mode, as we will see below.

13 The issue of grading may be seminal at this point. Though it is beyond the scope of the present study to discuss the specific component of the research, it is worth noting that, in a number of cases, the grade given by feedback providers was lower than that of the tutor.
4.2.2. Form as against content

The second feature of peer feedback to be explored was the focus on content or form. As noted by receivers, their colleagues focussed on both equally (64.1%) and much less on form (17.9%) or content (17.9%) alone. Givers’ responses lend further support to these findings, since they also stated their eye was attracted to both types of error (64.1%) mostly and much less to content (20.5%) or form (15.4%). Looking into givers’ actual comments, however, reveals that, while givers may have generally dealt with both types of error, there were several instances where form was their exclusive concern, unlike what is supported by some of the findings in section 2.3 earlier, perhaps because of the training focus on content might require. Yet, further research would be needed to establish this point more firmly.

Also connected to the issue of content vs form is respondents’ perception of each of the analytic criteria in the report compiled. Thus, givers reported finding content-related criteria, namely ‘rationale and analysis’, ‘use of the literature’ and ‘application of theory to practice’ harder to deal with than form-related criteria, such as ‘structure and organisation’ or ‘language and style’. These three criteria actually collected a total of 85.8% of their answers and the reason they gave was either that they ‘had difficulty with them when compiling their own assignments’ or that ‘addressing these criteria meant reading their colleague’s work very carefully’. This might explain why no clear advantage of content over form correction emerged in the feedback provided. Receivers, by contrast, seemed to have no particular trouble dealing with any of these specific criteria in their colleague’s feedback but, interestingly, when they had trouble, it was mostly because they ‘were worried in case their colleague had misinterpreted the specific criteria and mis-evaluated their paper’. This further adds to the traces of mistrust discussed earlier.

4.2.3. Selectivity

Finally, givers were asked whether they corrected selectively or exhaustively and why. A robust percentage (59.0%) chose ‘selectively’, 33.3% exhaustively and 7.7% said they did neither of the two. When asked to justify their decision, a student supported exhaustive correction by stating that she “tried to find and correct all crucial mistakes that were part of the marking criteria, just as she would wish to be corrected herself” while another student opted for selective correction because “some did not affect the image or the content of the assignment and it is too difficult to correct everything; moreover, there may be things I did not realize needed correcting” and several suggested this was due to lack of time. It appears, therefore, that the choice between selective and comprehensive feedback was not made on the basis of allowing receivers to work on one thing at a time but, mostly, either along idiosyncratic lines or for time and lack of experience reasons.

A final question which sheds some more light on the micro-elements of feedback discussed in this section required receivers to compare their colleague’s feedback with that of their tutor in terms of being less or more detailed, less or more direct and less or more tentative. The only marked answer was about peer feedback being less detailed than the tutor’s (49.1%), with ‘other’ coming next (17.0%) and including comments like ‘overwhelming and harsh’, ‘stricter but also more superficial’, ‘too judgemental’. This could be interpreted as yet another complaint regarding the quality of the peer feedback provided. In any case, the tutor’s example apparently looms large, as is also demonstrated in respondents’ view of their peer’s correction style generally. Thus, 35.9% of the receivers felt that their peer ‘followed the tutor’s correction style’ while 53.8% thought they ‘had tried to combine his/her way of marking with the tutor’s style’. Quite interestingly, givers felt they followed...
their tutor’s style in 71.8% and their own style in 17.9% of the cases. We can therefore see that the tutor’s correction style is a determinant of the peer correction process. Providing learners with further training might encourage them to develop a more personal mode of correction.

5. Further discussion and concluding remarks

Our findings add up to peer feedback in the DL tertiary education context being perceived as a mixed blessing. Providers are apparently more enthusiastic than receivers, who need to handle the emotional cost of being judged by a peer, often less competent than them (see also Robinson, Pope & Holyoak, 2013). This, however, could change if students became more feedback-literate, which, as argued in Carless & Boud (2018), would involve “appreciating feedback, making judgements, managing affect, taking action” (p. 1). Carless & Boud view peer feedback as one of the means of developing this literacy but we would argue that peer feedback literacy may also benefit from learners’ feedback literacy development generally. Developing self-evaluation skills may also help develop judgement skills (Boud, Lawson & Thompson, 2013, 2015) and, as a result, peer evaluation skills, too. Moreover, if students learn how to manage affect, the emotions which appear to lead receivers to respond to peer feedback defensively or givers to show little empathy and be judgemental would be regulated and peer feedback might be perceived as more beneficial.

What seems important with regard to affect is regulating ‘the tone in which feedback is shared’ (Lipnevich, Berg & Smith; 2016, in Carless & Boud, 2018, p. 4). If students are made aware of the negative impact of excessive directness in the phrasing of their comments and complete lack of mitigation, their feedback will most probably become less threatening for their peers’ ego and will also be perceived as more helpful, as the feeling of mistrust would be eliminated. Konbhi & Sandeghi (2013) argue that “giving positive feedback first might reduce assessee anxiety and improve acceptance of negative feedback” (p. 90). On the other hand, however, receiver resistance to peer feedback in the Greek DL context may also be a cultural issue. The relevance of culture in feedback reception was pointed to in de Luque & Sommer (2000), who found a correlation between the type of culture and preferred form of feedback. If culture “provides the categories by which we understand the world, and the scripts and schemes we use to guide behavior” (Mezias, Chen & Murphy, 1999, p. 326, in de Luque & Sommer, 2000, p. 830), then it is more or less to be expected that feedback and feedback-related behaviour will also be interpreted along these categories. Feedback-seeking behaviour (Ashford & Cummins, 1983) may thus also be affected (see discussion in de Luque & Sommer, 2000). Further research determining the culture-specificity of DL learners’ choices, as in the present work, is in order.

Closely related to the cultural determinant is the power game idea. An important finding is that peer feedback, which might have been expected to counterbalance ‘power asymmetries’ by shifting the feedback provision role away from the tutor, allowed asymmetries in peer relationships to emerge; givers provided overbearing feedback in some cases while receivers felt their peers were being more ‘distanced’ and ‘all-powerful’ than ‘sympathetic’. This, however, might not have been so if givers and receivers had swapped roles, if the process was repeated and/or if both groups had undergone some training in feedback provision and reception (see Carless & Boud, 2018; Ferris, 2003; Hansen & Liu, 2005; van Zundert, Sluijsmans & van Merrienboer, 2010; Yu & Lee, 2016 and references therein). After all, the students participating in the present study also pointed to the need to be educated on peer feedback processes. Research carried out so far has revealed positive
effects (see Yu & Lee, 2016 and references therein; Hojeij & Baroudi, 2018) but a concrete way to organise such training in DE is still to be worked out (cf. Filius et al., 2018).

As regards the social underpinnings of peer feedback provision, participants seem to have appreciated the dialogic element as well as, though less so, the idea of more than a single voice being heard but the broader implications of peer feedback scaffolding paving the way to networking and creating a tighter community of practice appear to be neglected. Moreover, as we saw in the presentation of our findings, the perceived benefits of peer feedback were mostly in relation to the self, not the others. Culture-related resistance may need to be calculated while the contribution of time constraints also needs to be gauged, especially in a DL programme. Time problems were raised in the open-ended questions by several respondents. The specific benefits of ‘dialogue’ may also need to be measured. Filius et al. (2018; see also references therein) argue that deep learning may result from the dialogue triggered by peer feedback because learners question it and therefore think more about it. Mistrust may therefore not always be totally negative.

The thorny issue of peer feedback being combined with peer assessment in the form of grading and the washback effect the latter might have on the former (see, i.a., Kaufman & Schunn, 2011) also need to be considered. In the present work this issue was dealt with only in passing. However, informal analysis of our data revealed that students who expressed negative feelings about the feedback they received from their peers were the ones who had been given a lower grade than the one they were given by the tutor. We would therefore suggest that peers’ role as graders may also impact their role as feedback providers generally. On the other hand, peer-tutor differences in assessment may underline the importance of the role of peer feedback, as argued in 2.1, as a way of undermining dogmatic truth, a benefit which should not go unnoticed. Generally, the information derived from the peer feedback giver and receiver experience has been quite enlightening and further comparison with tutor-driven feedback might give us further insight into the complex issue of written feedback, especially in DE.

References


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Special Issue on

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS AND DISSERTATIONS
IN DISTANCE LEARNING WITHIN THE TESOL CONTEXT

Section Three:
Assignments, dissertations and research

Guest Editors: Ifigenia Kofou, Kosmas Vlachos,
and Athanasios Karasimos

Introduction

Acknowledging the significance of research as part of assignments and dissertations in Distance Education, this section provides space for researchers, practitioneres and students of the post-graduate programme ‘The Teaching of English as a Foreign/International Language’ of the Hellenic Open University to share their experience while doing research for their assignments and dissertations as well as to discuss challenges in Research Methods. The authors maintain that Research Methodology and Statistical Analysis are integral parts of any type of research and they should be taught in post-graduate programmes as a compulsory module. They also acknowledge the determinant and guiding role of the supervisor, especially in Distance Education programmes.

In the paper entitled ‘A case study to compare the effects of two different practices applied when assessing language learners’, Maria Gorgogeta and Kosmas Vlachos, taking into account the innumerous benefits technology has in instruction, explore its effectiveness in the field of assessment. By carrying out a descriptive case study and by using two methods of evaluation in parallel, the traditional paper-and-pencil and the web-based assessment, the research yields conclusions on the learners’ need for more meaningful, motivating assessment processes, such as online testing.

In the paper ‘Analyzing the efficacy of Moodle towards in-service EFL teachers’ development: the case of the HOU’, Evaggelia Theohari conducts a small-scale, mixed-
methods study in order to offer insights into the contribution of the current use of Moodle at the Hellenic Open University to EFL teacher development. The findings point to the conclusion that Moodle does not foster the philosophies on which it is based since collaborative and constructional learning are not greatly promoted. It is also evident that the use of Moodle has done little to enhance EFL teacher development and meet the new needs and challenges of higher education in the 21st century, as it is mainly used as a tool set for information distribution and administrative effectiveness. Only by applying more constructivist and learner-centred practices can Moodle lead to significant learning outcomes for EFL teachers.

Marina Kollatou, in the paper entitled ‘Conducting action research for written assignments in the M.Ed. in TESOL of the H.O.U: a case study’, seeks answers to questions such as: What are the difficulties that a student needs to cope with in order to effectively complete action research and what are the benefits he or she enjoys in the end? What impact does this practice have on the learners? By assuming two roles, that of the English language teaching practitioner and that of the researcher, the author employs the portfolio, recommended by many researchers for the assessment of language skills, to provide answers to the above questions through a small scale action research conducted in the Greek Senior High School ELT context and in the framework of the module of Testing and Assessment of the M.Ed in TESOL.

Dimitra Hasogia, in the paper entitled ‘Exploring the implementation of CLIL-based Science lessons in the Greek School EFL context’, scrutinizes the ways learners could improve their competences and skills during the process of creating a Web Quest project on the basis of adequately applying CLIL-based Science lessons with the aid of ICT and examine their effectiveness in the Greek Primary School educational arena. The method of project-based learning integrated with technology and experiential learning gives students the opportunity to develop intellectual and social skills, activate those learning strategies which enable them to carry out tasks successfully and become autonomous learners, and enjoy the benefits of a differentiated curriculum.

In the paper entitled ‘Greek EFL teachers’ views and practices regarding teaching: a dissertation survey’, Maria Gidarakou describes a dissertation research among Greek EFL teachers, by giving emphasis on the research tools used, i.e. a web questionnaire and an one-to-one interview, for collecting data as well as their characteristics, advantages and limitations. The results show that web questionnaires save time and the data are analysed more easily, while the interview helps provide extra information and comments, and a deeper understanding of the respondents’ views.

Valentina Peroukidou, in the paper entitled ‘Conducting academic research for a dissertation: the perspective of a graduate on available tools and difficulties encountered’, supports that academic research is an integral part of acquiring a university degree, and reviewing literature sets the basis for enabling students to develop a critical stance towards the course content as well as completing written assignments and dissertations successfully. From the perspective of a graduate, in an effort to assist other researchers, she provides a description of the process of doing research in the context of the post-graduate programme ‘The Teaching of English as a Foreign/International Language’ offered by the Hellenic Open University, and focuses on the relation of academic research to technology, the role of the tutors and the difficulties encountered.
Finally, Ifigenia Kofou, in the paper ‘A small-scale study on research issues by interviewing TESOL post-graduate students at the Hellenic Open University’, acknowledging the difficulties that distance learning students face in organizing their research and using research tools, conducts a small-scale research by using a semi-structured interview as the most convenient tool to collect quantitative and qualitative data and examine the views and experiences of TESOL students attending the post-graduate program ‘The Teaching of English as a Foreign/International Language’ at HOU as regards the research done and the methods used for their assignments and dissertations. The results reveal the great contribution of the dissertation booklet to students’ organizing their research, the significant role of the supervisor in helping students select the tools and methods and organize their research, and the contribution of dissertations and relevant research to the acquisition of knowledge, students’ professional development, self-regulated learning and autonomy.

Ifigenia Kofou, Kosmas Vlachos, and Athanasios Karasimos
A case study to compare the effects of different practices applied when assessing language learners

Maria GORGOGETA & Kosmas VLACHOS

While preparing students for examinations of language certifications, there felt to be absence of purpose and too much negative attitude towards the process on their behalf. Taking into account the innumerable benefits technology has in instruction, through this study there has been an attempt to explore its effectiveness in another field, that of assessment. For the needs of the current research, a descriptive case study was carried out. The target group was assessed using two methods of evaluation in parallel: the traditional paper-and-pencil and the web-based assessment. As far as the method of collecting data is concerned, a mixed methods approach was used, namely both qualitative and quantitative since each one poses certain limitations. Despite certain limitations, the findings of the current research yielded conclusions on learners’ need for more meaningful, motivating assessment processes. The students opted for online testing in comparison to traditional paper-and-pencil forms as they were motivated to self-evaluate their own progress while receiving the necessary guidance.

Η εργασία εστιάζει στο χώρο της αξιολόγησης, και της ανάπτυξης εγγενών κινήτρων με τη χρήση των ΤΠΕ. Στο πλαίσιο της διδακτικής της Αγγλικής γλώσσας στα ελληνικά φροντιστήρια εκμάθησης ξένων γλωσσών, η παρούσα έρευνα επιχειρεί να διερευνήσει την ευρέως αναγνωρισμένη δυνατότητα συγκεκριμένων καινοτόμων μεθόδων να ενεργοποιήσουν το κίνητρο και τη δετική στάση των μαθητών απέναντι στην αξιολόγηση, με τη δημιουργία ουσιαστικών συνθηκών για την αυτονομία και τον της ικανότητα εγγραφική μαθήτη. Προς αυτή την κατεύθυνση, ένας αριθμός τεχνολογιών Web 2.0 χρησιμοποίηθηκαν για να αξιολογήσουν τις γλωσσικές δεξιότητες των μαθητών στο γραπτό και προφορικό λόγο καθώς και τις γνώσεις τους στη γραμματική, προσφέροντας ταυτόχρονα ευκαιρίες για αυτοαξιολόγηση και αναστοχασμό. Ειδικότερα, διεξήχθη μια περιγραφική μελέτη περίπτωσης κατά την οποία η ομάδα-στόχος αξιολογήθηκε χρησιμοποιώντας δύο μεθόδους αξιολόγησης παράλληλα: την παραδοσιακή χαρτί και μολύβι και την αξιολόγηση μέσω διαδικτύου. Τα ευρήματα της έρευνας απέδωσαν συμπεράσματα σχετικά με την ανάγκη των μαθητών για πιο ουσιαστικές και κίνητρο διαδικασίες αξιολόγησης.
1. Introduction

Since testing seems to be the bedrock of educational assessment, it represents a correlation between high academic standards and tangible evaluation of skills. However, most of the existing formal and informal tests fail to measure the kind of skills a literate twenty-first-century citizen needs, namely analysis, comparison, evaluation and inference. As a consequence, the need to improve the assessment techniques we as educators use and treat evaluation as an integral part of the learning process, is imperative.

2. Reasons for conducting the specific research

2.1. Limitations of traditional assessment in the EFL classroom

Traditional assessment practices that take place in most EFL classrooms make estimations about learners’ ability to recall or detect pieces of knowledge rather than their ability to use the English language meaningfully in situations which simulate real life. Thus, results deriving from such procedures are not representative of students’ actual performance, skills and progress as they mostly mask what the learner actually knows or is able to do regarding the language. Other negative aspects of traditional assessment concern the anxiety and stress caused to students; it also fails to provide motivation and is prone to teachers’ bias to a great extent. Furthermore, the hitherto paper-and-pencil tests seem to assess some discrete, de-contextualized features of language instead of providing adequate context so that the overall language performance can be evaluated (Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000). More often than not, the feedback provided is mainly immediate error correction upon the actual test. Typical writing or speaking tests entail mechanic production of speech on tasks that are detached from real life communication. Educators then, find themselves trapped in an attempt to denote a learner’s performance and achievement in a mere grade or a few brief comments (Peat & Franklin, 2002), thus the feedback provided is limited to external and corrective as happens with the rest of the skills.

Nowadays the Internet has pervaded a number of fields in our lives and education could not be excluded. Moreover, it has brought about radical changes in the way we work, study and get informed. Educational technology is a rapidly developing field consisting of a variety of innovations which, if applied, can ameliorate both the learning and teaching process to a great extent. The opportunities offered are innumerable and features such as graphics, animation and image aligned with relevant educational content provide students with a meaningful, pleasant learning experience (McDonough et al, 2013). All the above, triggered our will to create a more meaningful testing environment for my students.

2.2. Hitherto research and current research purpose

The various possibilities web-based assessment offers have been exploited more and more by educators during the last decades. However, the hitherto research mainly focuses on the time...
efficiency and easiness such a method caters for, exempting an educator’s heavy workload regarding marking, especially on summative, large-scale examinations in higher education. More specifically, deductions drawn by the analysis of results led Brown et al. (1999) and Thelwall (2000) claim that the greatest benefit seems to be the reduction of workload by conducting an automated assessment process. Accordingly, the decrease in marking loads along with the ease and efficiency of administration was the subject of study for Bull and McKenna (2003). Although this use could be really beneficial and useful from a teacher’s point of view, it seems to be limiting the opportunities for students’ progress in a more formative context of evaluation.

The current research aimed to explore aspects of assessment through the use of technology and Web 2.0 tools with a view to gain a better insight on how learners’ perceive the assessment procedure, make them realize that the process is of equal importance as the result and provide them with all the necessary skills they should possess after a course is completed. Therefore, along with the assessment criteria to be met in every exam (e.g. high reliability, validity, practicality), the evaluation of a number of language skills is attempted, taking advantage of the vivid representation of the web and multimedia. What is more, the instant, analytic feedback available after each test provides the test takers with a fruitful testing experience.

3. Implementation of research

3.1. Purpose of research and research questions

Based on the above facts, the current research focused on the implementation of novel practices with the aid of technology in order to create a fruitful evaluation context for the exam-level students of a language school in Athens. The questions attempted to be answered are:

1. What are the learners’ attitudes towards web-based assessment as a diverse motivating way of evaluating a number of skills compared to traditional paper-and-pencil forms of assessment?
2. To what extent can such practices encourage self-reflection and motivation in an EFL context?
3. What kind of feedback can be given over web-based assessment tasks and how do learners perceive it?

3.2. Participants / Learners’ profile and teaching context

The group of learners who participated in the current study consisted of eight students attending an exam class of proficiency level with their main target having been the final exams for the acquisition of the corresponding certificate in November 2016. In terms of gender, there were seven girls and one boy and their ages ranged from 14 to 16. As for their level of performance, it could be characterized as a mixed-ability class since there are three students considered of high ability, three average and two weaker ones. While preparing students for examinations of certifications, there felt to be absence of purpose and too much negative attitude towards the process on their behalf. Not only was the lesson a constant effort to predict potential test items and take as many past papers as possible, but also every test taken was a constant reminder of the required successful score. Thus, this group seemed to need a change in the way they were assessed and a better training towards the evaluation procedure.
3.3. Design of testing material

The first stage of the research was the design of the assessment tasks; the design of any test, let alone a language one, should be governed by certain principles, the so-called assessment criteria. The items designed for the particular tests assigned during this research attempted to meet these criteria to the greatest extent possible. The first section of assessment concerned vocabulary and grammar awareness and took place after every unit of the followed curriculum using the Web 2.0 tool Socrative (Appendix I). Since this kind of testing assesses competence, it is a form of indirect testing as according to Shavelson (2013) it requires the mere recognition of the correct answer without eliciting performance. The discrete-point format the items have, encourage high degree of reliability which makes the marking objective while echoing second generation testing. Taking into account the remarks expressed by opponents of multiple choice items, test takers were given a fuller context than usual in an attempt to avoid disembodied language, at the same time that the short texts or long sentences aimed at providing a full semantic and linguistic environment (Douglas, 2010). Accordingly, a number of other task items such as True/False and gap filling ensured variety and the moving out of the traditional checking of discrete lexical items involved learners to re-encoding processes in contrast to the traditional decoding ones when identifying a correct answer.

According to modern pedagogy, a communicative approach should be adopted especially when the productive skills are assessed, with the focus being mainly on the kind of language used in real communication (Heaton, 1989). To this end, the assessment of the productive skills in this research adopts a purely communicative orientation. In terms of speaking, presentations addressing 21st century-skill development were performed on behalf of the learners, recorded and then replayed using the Web 20.0 tool Vocaroo (Appendix II) so that they could self-reflect on their outcome while assessing them according to certain rubrics. At the same time, the recording was sent to the teacher who was assessing in parallel. The results of the evaluation were then compared and contrasted, leading to fruitful deductions for both sides helping students form a better perception on self-evaluation. Written accounts encompassing problem solving activities and adoption of roles were also produced in response to videos used as prompts using the platform Vialogues and the class’s blog (Appendix III) and were assessed in the very same way, following writing rubrics.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Methodology employed

In terms of methodology, the present study employs a quasi-experimental design. For its needs, assessment tasks corresponding to a particular level were designed through the use of Web 2.0 tools and learners were encouraged to perform them in parallel with sitting conventional pencil-and-paper tests. A descriptive case study was carried out, namely the kind of case study employed to describe an intervention or phenomenon and the real-life context in which it took place (Yin, 2003). Over the past few years, the case study research design has gained ground especially when investigating trends and certain conditions in various scientific fields. As a method, it goes beyond the limits of mere statistical survey, being an in-depth study of a specific situation. A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in the real world context (Atkins & Wallace, 2012). It is a study of a single instance of a bounded system, such as a community, a school, a class, a clique, a child, etc. (Creswell, 1994). The data collection methods may include interviews, observations, open-ended questionnaires, diaries and verbal reports, documents and records, etc.
Although through its use answers are not answered completely, it is ideal when attempting to test theoretical models and theories in actual real-world contexts, as it gives indications and fosters further elaboration on a topic (Stake, 1995). Both quantitative and qualitative data were retrieved as a mixed methods approach was employed regarding the data collection process. Therefore, a multi-method approach widely known as triangulation was employed so that the highest reliability and validity could be achieved (Dornyei, 2007). The quantitative data were collected through the administration of two questionnaires, before and after the implementation of the web-assessment practices, so as to pre- and post-assess learners’ attitudes and perceptions on the two different testing approaches. To this end, the actual numerical data of their performance results were collated and compared to prove the potential effectiveness of this innovative method. Parallel to this process, qualitative data were gathered through class observations and records on the teacher’s log concerning the degree of response to the assigned tasks on behalf of the learners and their overall reactions.

4.2. Instrumentation

As mentioned above, the current research employs both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection. In terms of purpose, the former attempts to realize and explain social interactions, while the latter tests hypotheses, monitors cause and effect and facilitates predictions. The instrument used for qualitative data was a log kept by the teacher, with a view to record the participants’ reactions, comments, degree of engagement, along with observations on the impact the assessment had on teaching and learning. The purpose of teacher observation logs is to record systematically observations of students’ progress and performance, and use these cumulative observations in order to draw deductions about skill development, progress towards goal achievement and areas of strength or weakness.

By definition, the documentation does not need to be lengthy or elaborate as the importance lies in the frequent and systematic gathering of information that will form a holistic, rich picture of learner performance and attitude (Stiggins, 2001). By focusing on issues of motivation, critical thinking and autonomy, ample data were gathered that helped the teacher gain better insight of the participants’ expectations and the process itself (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

The quantitative research employed the use of questionnaires, which consists the most common tool in this kind of study. This orderly list of questions aim at obtaining facts, attitudes and opinions, while at the same time it yields answers on how and why people behave in a certain way. This instrument is of invaluable help for a researcher, so that he/she can make decisions, improve and reconsider the course of study, recommend any alternative policies and procedures and suggest changes. Both the pre- and post- assessment questionnaires were designed according to certain principles and criteria dictated by Dornyei (2003) so as to elicit as accurate answers as possible. The items were uttered as clearly as possible and in short length so as not to tire or confuse the participants, the options provided were realistic and easily comprehensible (Gillham, 2000), sensitive or personal questions were avoided, while the layout attempted to be attractive and exploit the advantage of technology to its utmost. The type of items chosen were closed-ended as they offer ease in coding, answering and analyzing; more specifically, they included yes/no questions, Likert-scale questions varying from three to five choices and checklists (Aiken, 1996).
5. Most important findings of the research

5.1. Pre-assessment questionnaire

The majority of the students held a rather negative attitude towards testing and appeared demotivated (62.5%) as becomes evident from Chart 1 probably because they felt they have no or limited involvement or choice concerning the assessment practices they usually undergo.

![Chart 1: Schematic representation of the responses to Pre-assessment questionnaire](image)

Asked about their feelings when taking a test (Chart 2), the respondents unanimously agreed to a great extent that they get nervous before sitting it, fortunately not to the point of having intense visible signs of nervousness but with consequences such as memory block. With slight exceptions, most learners do not get feelings of depression or become panicked by the potential results. However, half of the respondents felt inferior to their peers while the test is in progress, implying low self-esteem, as well as not confident enough that they will have a successful performance. The vast majority exhibited no feeling of excitement; on the other hand, they all felt that a good grade increases their confidence for the exam to follow. Last but not least, there is a divergence of opinions when it comes to whether the test takers have an awareness of how well they did during the examination.

As far as feedback is concerned, the learners interestingly defined it as something necessary that helps notice the error and it facilitates both understanding and the willingness to continue; however, there are cases in which it may cause anxiety or embarrassment as half of the respondents claimed, yet they disagreed that it provides de-motivation in trying again (Chart 3).
Lastly, concerning the role of the tests and the assessment of the various skills, students’ attitudes were positive to the fact that tests help them improve and that they learn better when they study for a test. They also seemed to be open to new methods such as presentations, projects and pair/group-
work activities as more pleasant ways of being evaluated. The vast majority strongly preferred to be assessed in receptive skills as they didn’t feel as exposed as in the productive ones, while more often than not, they got the feeling that the testing practices were not related to real life communication. An alarming observation though was that most learners are unwilling to answer questions in class for fear of making mistakes which again implies low motivation (Chart 4).

Chart 4: Schematic representation of the responses to Pre-assessment questionnaire

5.2. Collating students’ performance

At the end of each unit, both a progress test in pencil-and-paper mode and an online quiz were taken by the students at the very same week. The difference among the scores varied from 1% to 7% concerning the class’ mean, there were students though that exhibited a divergence even of 13% between the two tests. Most interestingly, the two weaker students (Students 7&8) were the ones who consistently achieved higher when assessed online, with an improvement of performance at about 4.5%. The stronger students (Students 1-3), given that they generally achieve high scores, did not exhibit high deviances more than 2-3% performing lower or higher on each test depending on the unit. There were certain instances though that they managed to score more than 10% in the online test. Concerning the average students (Students 4-6), they performed better in the online test in the majority of the exams, namely 4.3 to 4.8 % higher than in the paper-and-pencil test. As an overall estimation, the mean of every student was higher in the Socrative test apart from one student (Table 1).

The scores in writing performance did not demonstrate great deviations between the performances in the traditional and online essay writing. Students that are above average continued to achieve high marks, in most cases slight higher when performing the tasks in Vialogues. Average students tended to do better when assessed online as well, while weaker students seemed to have more problems dealing with problem-solving, less guided tasks other than their coursebook’s. In terms of self-reflective practices, the majority of the students held a low self-esteem regarding their skills and performance assigning their piece of writing a lower grade than the educator did. The deviation
ranged from one to two points on the overall score (Table 2). It is worth to mention that the above-average students seemed to hold higher self-confidence, assessing themselves with less strictness than the weaker ones.

![Bar chart showing scores on Socrative tests](image1)

**Table 1: Scores on Socrative tests (vocabulary/grammar)**

![Bar chart showing comparison of scores in online writing tasks](image2)

**Table 2: Comparison of scores in online writing tasks (Marks assigned by teacher and students after self-evaluation process)**

The speaking tests that took place in class met with high insecurity and reluctance, although the overall level was more than decent. Their performance in class speaking tests though seemed to be
poorer than when using Vocaroo, especially for the weakest students who are more inhibited. Once more, when asked to self-assess their performance and presentations, they seemed to be very strict with themselves assigning a much lower grade than the one assigned by their teacher, especially the students with the poorest performance (Table 3). It should be noted that in both cases of the productive skills, great progress was made as sessions proceeded since learners became better acquainted with the rubrics and the self-evaluation mentality, which helped them be more precise when performing or assessing.

![Graph showing comparisons of scores in online speaking tasks](image)

**Table 3: Comparisons of scores in online speaking tasks (Marks assigned by teacher and students after self-evaluation process)**

5.3. **Post-assessment questionnaire**

After the completion of the study, learners were given a questionnaire to explore the different perspectives they gained through web-assessment. As for Socrative, 80% of the learners strongly agreed that they enjoyed the tests on this platform, they had no difficulty in reading the words and questions on the screen and the format was more appealing than the traditional one. Furthermore, they recognized to a great extent the contribution of online tests to reviewing grammar and vocabulary. The majority (70%) also agreed that tests on Socrative made them feel more relaxed, were easier and less stressful than paper-and-pencil tests and useful for learning grammar and vocabulary. In terms of technicalities, most (60%) disagreed that they used their book as a reference and strongly disagreed that the screen was uncomfortable for their eyes (Chart 5).

As far as speaking is concerned, the majority of respondents (60%), strongly agreed that they enjoyed the opportunity to produce speech without being exposed before the class and that the use of this tool gradually improved their performance. Although many found the self-assessment process demanding at first, they realized that it gave them better insight of the criteria of a good performance and was altogether a fruitful experience. Opinions were mixed though, when asked
about whether the whole process was more meaningful than a speaking exam taking place in class (Chart 6).

The opinions about the last Web 2.0 tool were positive as well. Learners in unison strongly agreed that Vialogues triggered stimulating discussions and encouraged writing for a purpose while addressing a defined audience. More than half agreed that it was an easy platform to use, it
provided opportunities to view certain issues from different perspectives and the videos chosen helped them in brainstorming ideas. In terms of reflection, the ultimate majority (100%) either agreed or strongly agreed that this method made them comprehend the points they should focus on more, along with the improvement of their written competence. Moreover, the largest percentage (70%) either disagreed or remained neutral when asked whether they had difficulty in producing written discourse via the computer (Chart 7). The responses to the latter three questions not only reveal a positive mentality towards online testing but also a high degree of learners’ motivation concerning being assessed with innovative methods.

![Evaluating Vialogues](image)

*Chart 7: Schematic representation of the responses to Post-assessment questionnaire*

Having been asked to choose the three most appealing features of online quizzes, most opted for the instant grading it provides, the sense of not being tested and the fact that it reminds an enjoyable, game-like activity, whereas the instant feedback, the less exposure to class and the attractive format were chosen by fewer. The least important issues seemed to be the ability to re-take the exam multiple times and the potential absence of time limit (Chart 8).

As for their preference, 70% opted for the online test rather than the traditional one, 10% would rather take the traditional test solely and 20% preferred both equally well. Last but not least, 70% of the test takers felt less anxious when taking a test on the computer, 30% equally anxious to taking a traditional exam and 10% more anxious than usual. These last findings indicate a clear degree of enhanced motivation compared to the original responses regarding traditional tests.
After taking the first two tests, students started discussing about them and the teacher took notes on the observation log (Table 4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Comments (on Socrative tests)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student 1</td>
<td>“It is funny, isn’t it?” “It looks like Quizdom!” “Miss, have you uploaded a new quiz?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 2</td>
<td>“Did you find the “fill in the gaps” exercise difficult?” “Miss, when are we going to have the next one?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 3</td>
<td>“It was great practice for the phrasal verbs that I always confuse”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 4</td>
<td>“It took me less than a normal test”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 5</td>
<td>“It doesn’t feel like taking a test”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 6</td>
<td>“It is very useful that once you make a mistake you can have such analytical explanation for your mistake”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 7</td>
<td>“I’ve heard many of these idioms in movies” “The tasks are similar to the ones we usually have but somehow more fun”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 8</td>
<td>“It feels like coaching for the upcoming exam”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Students’ comments on Socrative platform
The online assessment of speaking and writing skills were hailed with similar enthusiasm. As time went by, learners were responding more and more instantly to the tasks assigned and their enthusiasm was increasing. The table below (Table 5) includes some of their remarks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Comments (on Vocaroo)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student 1</td>
<td>“The fact that no one can listen to me while talking is very convenient”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 2</td>
<td>“Learning how to make a presentation may be very useful for our future career”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 3</td>
<td>“It never crossed my mind that there was such a voice recording tool”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 4</td>
<td>“It’s really easy to forward my talk to you when I’m done”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 5</td>
<td>“I had no idea that I could assign a mark to my performance”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 6</td>
<td>“At first I felt so embarrassed listening to myself but now I know what to do to improve”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 7</td>
<td>“Great tool! It’s fun talking alone!” “Rubrics were confusing at first but then easy to use”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 8</td>
<td>“I could never imagine that I could enjoy speaking so much!”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Students’ comments on Vocaroo platform

5.5. Triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative data

As students’ answers during the pre-assessment gathering of data implied, their attitudes towards testing were negative for a variety of reasons such as the anxiety they undergo, the fact that they have no say to the evaluation process and the dull test format they usually face. However, they realize the necessity and importance of corrective feedback and they regard speaking and writing the two most demanding skills to assess. The post-evaluation questionnaire yielded results concerning the impression students got after experiencing non-traditional methods of assessment. There seemed to be a shift to a more positive attitude, their degree of engagement appeared to be really high, especially after some sessions and the benefits from the self-reflection process seemed to be appreciated on behalf of the learners.

The remarks recorded in the teacher’s observation log suggest that the attitudes and opinions reflected in the questionnaires are verified by the qualitative data. The students got the feeling of not being tested while being web-assessed, the test anxiety levels were limited, learners became more and more motivated in exploring the various techniques and diverse formats and therefore there was no mismatch among the retrieved data of either method.

6. Discussion of the results

The first area of research interest concerned the learners’ attitudes towards e-assessment as a more motivating process than the traditional paper-and-pencil tests. Based on the findings of the study,
motivation and positive feelings were developed to the test-takers, as they considered the format more attractive and the overall process more interesting and pleasant. Thanks to its game-like nature and a variety of features such as instant feedback provision and immediate grading, web-assessment became popular among students almost immediately.

Traditional forms of assessment still mirror negative feelings, stress and even encourage acts like the use of any means in order to achieve a high score. Web 2.0 technologies promote interaction, exchange of opinions and meaning negotiation which among its innumerable benefits, help develop social skills and higher-order thinking which if developed properly lead to higher self-esteem and learner autonomy (Skourtou & Kourtis-Kazoullis, 2002).

Another conclusion drawn was that e-assessment practices encourage self-reflection and also motivation towards being assessed in skills students are not usually fond of. The way speaking and writing assessments were performed, enabled students to reflect on their actual performance and self-evaluate each part of it. This process helped them realize the necessary points they should include in their piece of work, namely their written or spoken discourse, acquire life skills like self-reflection abilities and become more autonomous learners by being able to monitor and manage their own performance.

A number of studies have dealt with the provision of feedback, the effect it has on the test-taker, the improvement it may incur in the learner’s future performance and a series of issues. Each kind of feedback has something positive to offer most of the times and encourages a certain stage of the learning process. While assessing grammar and vocabulary online, feedback was unavoidably external, provided by the computer as the main motivation of the students and what they rated as the feature of the highest importance concerning web-based test were the instant grading and feedback. This type was chosen as it aims at correcting the erroneous answer, giving prompt and immediate instruction along with justification for the correct item (De la Fuente, 2015). Regarding the performance assessment, internal feedback was selected which is the outcome of inner mechanisms and the attempt of the individual to self-monitor his/her own progress, yet later supplemented by supportive feedback provided by the educator a kind of feedback which reinforces and encourages positive behavior through comments which do not carry only negative connotations on the learner’s performance (Bankier, 2012). Serving this purpose, a more friendly, student-center approach was employed concerning comments and final grading of their competence.

7. Suggestions for further research and alternative research methods

Hopefully, the current research yielded some valuable results on the positive impact novel assessment practices in conjunction with the employment of Web 2.0 tools have on teaching and learning, but first and foremost on students’ psychological state. While carrying out the research especially the experimental part, the great potential the field of computer-assisted assessment has emerged.

Similar studies should be carried out on a larger-scale sample and with less time limitations so that the maximum benefits of the process can be reaped. Furthermore, the ages of the participants could be more varied in order to explore the different perceptions and impact online testing has on diverse age groups. Aside from the self-assessment practices that took place, opportunities for peer-assessment could also be given and further promoted.
Given the fact that students welcomed this new way of being tested in enthusiasm, the receptive skills could also be assessed through the use of Web 2.0 tools, taking advantage of every possibility technology provides and fostering strategies to help learners’ performance improve, adopting in other words an assessment for learning orientation.

In terms of methodology, action research could be a very successful research method to be used as it is the kind of research initiated to explore and solve a specific problem in the teaching or learning context by systematic qualitative data elicitation and analysis (Heigham & Croker, 2009). Since its purpose is to solve a particular problem and to produce guidelines for better practice, especially in the field of EFL education, it is usually associated with solving the teaching and learning problems within classrooms which brings the teacher himself/herself in the position of the researcher, as he/she serves as a significant source of knowledge concerning his/her own classroom situation. To this end, interviews and observations might be the most appropriate means to carry out such research as it would help gather more information and data on students’ difficulties or lesson’s limitations. Once the educator retrieves the reasons behind a problem, he/she can adjust teaching into the learners’ needs and take action to improve the activities conducted (Fei, 2015).

As far as quantitative data are concerned, a research method that could benefit a lot the continuation of the current research as well as the field of EFL assessment in general is the correlational study. A correlational study investigates relationships between variables, namely, it explores whether or not two variables are correlated and how strong their correlation is. A larger-scale sample along with the implementation of such a research method could yield fruitful and reliable results since sometimes more than two variables are involved. As Kalla (2011) summarizes, an increase in one variable may give rise to an increase in the other, and a decrease in one gives rise to a decrease in the other and vice versa. Therefore, when we refer to a population of learners with different characteristics and educational needs along with the implementation of different teaching and assessment practices, variables might yield various and interesting results.

8. Concluding remarks

The way the current study was conducted, along with the instrumentation and the approach used, enabled the researcher to explore various aspects of the studied topic and draw deductions about the innumerable possibilities it offers despite the limited sample.

Being aware from the very beginning of the limitations such a sample poses, the educator attempted to conduct a number of assessment sessions in a variety of language skills, during a considerable range of time while monitoring constantly the evolution of the study and the subjects’ reactions and performance. Through this process, it was achievable at the end to have some safe and encouraging conclusions once this case study was completed.

Based on social-constructivist pedagogy, Web 2.0 tools foster individual learning styles and diverse cognitive needs (Vlachos, 2010) by creating a student-friendly learning or testing environment, deprived of stress; consequently, learners are encouraged to develop their own intelligences and personal styles and acquire the necessary strategies and skills in order to achieve autonomy and lifelong learning (Vlachos, 2005). Thus, it can easily be concluded that this kind of technology has yet a crucial role to play both in teaching and assessing language.
E-assessment triggers rethinking of the whole curriculum and more contemporary assessment practices as learners’ achievements can now be evaluated reliably, cost-effectively and immediately (Shojaei & Motamedi, 2014). Moreover, students seem to value the support and encouragement they receive towards acquiring control over the whole learning procedure (Dron, 2007) becoming self-regulated learners who have the ability to perform learning tasks that promote knowledge creation, understanding and higher order thinking (Stubbe & Theunissen, 2008) by applying practices such as reflection, testing, monitoring, questioning and self-evaluation.

This implies that a pedagogic shift and greater personalisation of learning constitute essential features of self-monitored, independent learning, hence educators should realize that students’ perceptions and mental models ought to hold a significant role in the design of learning and assessment processes in a dynamic mode.

References


APPENDIX I

The ...............(clear) with which the author explains the subject makes the book a pleasure to read.

Correct Answer:
clarity

Explanation:
noun

Which of the Egyptian pharaohs had the longest ..........?

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
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<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>reign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>voyage</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SUBMIT ANSWER
Correct!

Question:
Which of the Egyptian pharaohs had the longest ..........?

Correct Answer:
reign

Explanation:
reign=period of time a king or queen rules a country

..........had the aeroplane taken off than the baby got sick

A  Little

B  On no account

C  No sooner

D  Only by
Incorrect

Question: ............had the aeroplane taken off than the baby got sick

Correct Answer: No sooner

Explanation: No sooner+Past perfect...than
APPENDIX II
Maria Gorgogeta (mgorgoge@gmail.com) received her BA from the Department of English Language and Literature of the AUTH in 2005 and her M.Ed. in TESOL from the Hellenic Open University in 2016. In the meanwhile, she had been working as an English teacher in private foreign language schools, in institutes of vocational formation and in state schools in Greece. She is currently working in Agora Portals International School in Palma de Mallorca. Her field of expertise and interest concerns assessment and educational technology.

Kosmas Vlachos (kosmasvlachos@yahoo.co.uk) is Associate Lecturer at the Department of English Language and Linguistics, Faculty of English Language and Literature, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens and teaches Educational Technology in the Masters Program in TESOL of the Hellenic Open University. He worked as a teacher of English for 24 consecutive years, serving the last 8 years of that time as a school principal, and, also, was for a considerable period of those years, Chair and Vice Chair of the Pan-Hellenic Association of Teachers of the English Language.
Analyzing the efficacy of Moodle towards in-service EFL teachers’ development: the case of the HOU

Evangelia THEOHARI

The present article focuses on the use of Moodle in the M.Ed. in TESOL programme of the Hellenic Open University (HOU). More specifically, it explores whether the current use of Moodle enhances the development of the aforementioned teachers and if it promotes the social constructivist pedagogy, on which the philosophy of the platform is based. The motivation behind this study was recent literature review which has revealed a need for integrating technology into teacher education programmes on condition that effective educational uses are applied. To this intent, a small-scale case study was conducted which employed a mixed-methods research model including a questionnaire survey and some interviews. The results substantiate the hypothesis that a more elaborate use of Moodle through a transformation of pedagogical practices towards social constructivist and learner-centered procedures would produce EFL teachers who would demonstrate significant learning outcomes.

Keywords: Moodle, blended learning, Learning Management Systems, e-Learning, social constructivism, teacher development
1. Introduction

Nowadays, education is undergoing significant changes contemplating new ways of teaching and learning (Mehrabi & Abtahi, 2012). More specifically, universities have witnessed the use of virtual environments which are available online organizing and disseminating information in a systematic, systemic and interactive manner either synchronously or asynchronously (Abdelraheem, 2012). As a result, there is an explosion in the number of institutes using Learning Management Systems (LMSs) to deliver blended learning and distance education courses in the hope of enhancing students’ learning experience. An example of an LMS is the Moodle platform which is built on the sound educational philosophy of social constructivism since it allows the exchange of information among users geographically dispersed through mechanisms of synchronous and asynchronous communication (Cole & Foster, 2010). Research has proven that Moodle usage enhances learning beyond the classroom for both teachers and learners, on condition that effective educational practices are applied (ibid). The purpose of this study is to investigate the efficacy of Moodle in the M.Ed. in TESOL programme of the HOU and explore the hypothesis that its current use does not potentiate EFL teacher development and that a more elaborate use of it through a transformation of pedagogical practices towards social constructivist and learner-centered procedures would produce EFL teachers who would demonstrate significant learning outcomes.

2. Literature review

2.1. E-learning and LMSs

The synchronous way of life has catalyzed the need for ongoing professional development of the existing workforce, has resulted in demands for flexible and convenient learning opportunities and has necessitated easier access to education. As a result, an explosion is occurring currently in the demand for distance education (Chavan & Pavri, 2004), with e-learning being one of the fastest modes. Actually, e-learning is an emerging educational practice which has grown dramatically over the past two decades with characteristics that suit the learning needs of modern society and that have a great impact on professional training and academic education (Sun et al., 2008). It has been defined as ‘online’ interactions of various kinds that take place between learners and tutors (Dougiamas, 2011). Gonella and Panto (2008) have traced the following four stages in the evolution of e-learning: web-based training, e-learning 1.1, online education and e-learning 2.0. In this final stage of e-learning the LMS continues to be the dominant technology for delivery of online courses (Rupesh Kumar, 2009).

LMSs allow for the creation of unique learning environments that can supplement in-class activities, empowering both students and instructors to reinforce the course material, and to engage with the material in a variety of different ways (Dougiamas & Taylor, 2003). They are generally described to be software applications used by the instructors to administer learning through the distribution of instructional materials and monitoring and assessment of student participation and performance (Srichanyachon, 2014). Additionally, they enable

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1 LMSs are software applications used by the instructors to administer learning through the distribution of instructional materials and monitoring and assessment of student participation and performance (Srichanyachon, 2014).
individual (student-to-content, student-to-student, instructor-to-student) and group interactions accommodated by built-in LMS tools (Kats, 2013). Today, most LMSs make extensive use of the web and include features such as discussion forums, chats, journals, automated testing, grading tools and student tracking.

The predominant reason that LMSs have seen such widespread implementation is an overriding expectation that their use will enhance a student’s learning experience, and thereby lead to better individual performance (Martín-Blas & Serrano-Fernández, 2009). Regrettably, some LMSs are primarily used as a tool set for information distribution and administrative effectiveness rather than a system with potential to improve teaching and learning activities (Black et al., 2007). If these platforms are used in their fullness, they have many capabilities like interaction, feedback, conversation and networking (Costa et al., 2012). Thus, the usability of the LMS is the key to the effectiveness and efficiency of the online course (Lewis et al., 2005).

2.2. The Moodle platform: an overview

One implementation of LMS is the Moodle platform which provides educators, administrators and learners with a single robust, secure and integrated system to create learning environments (Kabassi et al., 2016). It is available for free on the web (Cole & Foster, 2010) with various plugins for different functionalities, it allows the exchange of information among users through mechanisms of synchronous and asynchronous communication, such as forums and chats (Costa et al., 2012) and it permits teachers to provide and share documents such as assignments and quizzes with students, in an easy-to-learn and user-friendly interface (Dougiamas, 2011). Moodle’s worldwide numbers of more than 90 million users across both academic and enterprise level usage make it the world’s most widely used learning platform trusted by many institutions and organizations. Apart from universities, ‘Moodle is also used in high schools, primary schools, non-profit organizations, private companies, and by independent teachers and even home-schooling parents’ (Al-Ajlan, 2012, p. 200). In Greece, Moodle is trusted by more than 45 learning environments such as the National Technical University of Athens, the universities of Macedonia and Thessaly, the Greek School Network and the Hellenic Open University (HOU).

2.2.1. The Moodle philosophy

After the early years of forays into computer-mediated conferencing and web-based learning it is becoming clear that the pedagogical use of the Internet should be informed and appraised by clear theoretical perspectives (Amundsen, 1993) and that the correct and effective use of technology in education must be supported by proven pedagogical and practical procedures based on computer supported collaborative and constructional learning (Moreno et al., 2007). In the same vein, Abdelraheem (2012) claims that Moodle is built on the theoretical perspective of constructivism according to which knowledge is not passively received from the environment but it is actively constructed by the learner (Piaget, 1975). Additionally, many adopters refer to Moodle as being based on an extension to

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2 ‘The usability of the LMS is the extent to which a product can be used by specific users to achieve specified goals with effectiveness, efficiency and satisfaction in a specified context of use’ (Berns, 2004, p. 21).

3 The platform is trusted by many organizations including Shell, London School of Economics, State University of New York, Microsoft, the Open University (Moodle.Net, 2017), Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Yale.
constructivism called ‘social constructivist’ principles (Chao, 2008). Social constructivism has ideas that can be traced back to Vygotsky (1978) and ‘extends constructivism into social settings, wherein groups construct knowledge for one another, collaboratively creating a small culture of shared artifacts with shared meanings’ (Moodle Philosophy, n.d., p. 2).

Apart from the social constructivist philosophy, the main advantage of Moodle is that the courses developed are based on constructionist pedagogy as well (Veglis & Pomportsis, 2005). Constructionism asserts that ‘constructivism occurs especially well when the learner is engaged in constructing something for others to see’ (Dougiamas, 2000, p. 3). In addition to the aforementioned theories, Martin’s background in education led him to adopt the theoretical perspective of social constructionism as the main theory behind Moodle (Cole & Foster, 2010) with an emphasis on tools that promote collaboration and self evaluation.

While most Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) are instructor-oriented and largely concerned with how course content is delivered, Moodle is based on a learner-oriented philosophy called social constructionist pedagogy, in which students are involved in constructing their own knowledge’ (Chavan & Pavri, 2004, p. 129). According to this approach, people learn through a creative social process by investigating, analyzing, collaborating, sharing and reflecting (Martinez & Jagannathan, 2008).

2.2.2. The architecture of Moodle

The platform promotes the aforementioned theories through the different tools that it provides its users with. Thus, regarding its architecture, the Moodle platform is characterized by a set of functionalities grouped in two different classes, that of resources and that of modules (Blin & Munro, 2008). The latter provide a central point for information, discussion and collaboration among Moodle users (Al-Ajlan, 2012) and can be classified as follows: interactive tools where peer interaction is fostered through channels of communication such as discussion forums and chats, web 2.0 tools for collaboration such as journals, wikis and glossaries and finally both tools that provide timely feedback on performance (Martinez & Jagannathan, 2008) and tools specifically designed for collecting feedback from students.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Nature of the study

The study is both an exploratory case study, the case of the use of Moodle in the M.Ed. in TESOL programme of the HOU and an instrumental case study intended to investigate a wider issue (Stake, 1995, p. xi) that of the general use of Moodle in higher education as a tool for teacher development. It is in favour of a pragmatic approach thus the researcher remained as free as possible of paradigmatic dogmas and felt free to choose the research method that worked best in the enquiry (Dörnyei, 2007). As a result, a mixed methods

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4 Resources present instructional materials that are usually created in digital formats and then uploaded to the platform (webpages, power point files, word documents, flash animations, video and audio files represent some examples of these resources) and modules are components created via Moodle in order to provide interaction among students and teachers towards manipulation and content transformation (Blin & Munro, ‘08).

5 Case study is the study of the ‘particularity and complexity of a single case’ (Stake, 1995, p. xi).
research, ‘a new and vigorously growing branch of research methodology, which offers the best of both worlds’ (Brown, 2004, as cited in Dörnyei, 2007, p. 20) by ‘corroborating, elaborating or initiating findings from the other method’ (Rossman & Wilson, 1985, p. 627), was used. It involved both quantitative, through questionnaires, and qualitative, through interviews, methods in a separate and parallel manner because concurrent designs are invaluable when we examine a phenomenon that has several levels (Dörnyei, 2007) as it is the case of Moodle, which can be studied at the trainers’ level using interviews and at the trainees’ level using questionnaires. Finally, the aforementioned choice of method was made in order to achieve a fuller understanding of the target phenomenon, to foster triangulation and to verify one set of findings against the other (Sandelowski, 2003).

3.2. Hypothesis and research questions

The current study explores the hypothesis that the current use of Moodle in the M.Ed. in TESOL programme of the HOU does not promote the philosophy of the platform and as a result does not contribute to EFL teacher development and that a more elaborate use of it through a transformation of pedagogical practices towards social constructivist and learner-centered procedures would produce EFL teachers who would demonstrate significant learning outcomes. To this end, the researcher was genuinely interested in finding out if there was limited cooperation and communication among the participants through Moodle in an era when the most prevalent theoretical perspectives in research on online learning are those of social constructivism and social constructionism and in an era when both trainees and trainers are used to online communication. In addition, a need to explore the potential of the collaborative use of this tool, to prove that such a use brings higher learning achievements and to investigate if trainees and trainers prefer other ways of communication instead of the platform was expressed by the researcher. More specifically, this research aims at answering the following research questions:

1. What are the trainees’ attitudes and beliefs regarding the use of Moodle in the context of the M.Ed. in TESOL programme of the HOU?
2. How often and for what reason do the trainees use Moodle?
3. What kind of use would the trainees like to have in order to fulfill their training needs?
4. Why does the current use of the Moodle platform not enhance the trainees’ development?

3.3. The context and the subjects of the study

6 ‘Mixed methods research involves different combinations of qualitative and quantitative research either at the data collection or at the analysis levels (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 24). Researchers have been referring to studies that combine qualitative and quantitative methods under a variety of names, such as multitrait-multimethod research, interrelating qualitative and quantitative data, methodological triangulation, multi-methodological research, mixed model studies, and mixed methods research (Creswell et al., 2003). A straightforward way of describing mixed methods research is to define it as some sort of a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods within a single research project’ (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 44).

7 ‘Quantitative research involves data collection procedures that result primarily in numerical data which is then analysed primarily by statistical methods. Qualitative research involves data collection procedures that result primarily in open-ended, non-numerical data which is then analysed primarily by non-statistical methods’ (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 24).

8 The real breakthrough in combining qualitative and quantitative research occurred with the introduction of the concept of ‘triangulation’, which in Denzin’s (1978) terms, is a way of validating hypotheses by examining them through multiple methods.
The study addresses the students of the M.Ed. in TESOL programme of the HOU and it involves 72 participants, 70 female and 2 male, of different age groups ranging from 22 to 59. All of them have been teachers of English for some years and they were or have been students of the university for at least one year after the academic year of 2013-2014. This was the year when the Moodle platform was first used in the HOU and since then it has resulted in a very flexible system for it because it was very reliable, scalable and customizable. Finally, 2 tutors of the aforementioned programme and the developer of the platform participated in the study expressing their views, the former about the current use of the platform at the university and the latter mainly about the suggested use of it.

3.4. Data collection instruments

As it was mentioned in section 3.1, the researcher made use of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Regarding the quantitative instruments, a questionnaire (see Appendix I) was designed and administered to the trainees of the M.Ed. in TESOL programme of the HOU. Moreover, qualitative data were collected through some interviews with the developer of the Moodle platform and with two tutors of the above described programme.

3.4.1. The questionnaire

The researcher opted for the use of the questionnaire because ‘questionnaires are relatively easy to construct, extremely versatile and uniquely capable of gathering a large amount of information quickly in a form that is readily processible’ (Dörnyei, 2007, pp. 101-102). Furthermore, time and cost-efficiency are cited as some of its additional advantages (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010) that the researcher took into account. Regarding the concepts researched, the questionnaire included 5 basic sections focusing on the trainees’ attitudes towards the platform, their training on the use of the platform and the frequency of their use of it, the degree of interactivity and reflection promoted through Moodle, the frequency of their use in different features of Moodle and the way they would like to enhance their learning through the platform. Finally, ‘validity was improved through careful sampling, appropriate instrumentation and appropriate statistical treatments of the data’ (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 133). Concerning sample size, the researcher needed around 70 participants both ‘to make sure that these coefficients were significant and that she did not lose potentially important results’ (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010, p. 63).

3.4.2. The interviews

The interview is a natural and socially acceptable way of gathering information which can be used in a variety of situations to yield in-depth data (Dörnyei, 2007). Thus, the researcher interviewed individuals who could provide rich and varied insights into the phenomenon under investigation so as to maximize what she could learn. The interviews, as Kvale (1996) suggests, belonged to the category of a one-to-one ‘professional conversation’ and were ‘one-off events lasting about 30-60 minutes’ (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 134). Finally, they were highly structured directive interviews (Richards, 2003) and, in line with Dörnyei (2007, p. 135), the researcher ‘followed a prepared, elaborate interview schedule’ because she was

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9 http://study.eap.gr

10 ‘We can simply package up interviews as either directive (those following a specific agenda) or non-directive (those which are allowed to develop more naturally)’ (Richards, 2003, p. 51).
aware of what she did not know and could frame questions that would yield the needed answers. Finally, the researcher selected the three participants mentioned in section 3.3 who shared some important experience relevant to the study in order to conduct an in-depth analysis that would reveal common patterns in a group with similar characteristics (ibid).

4. Findings

4.1. Presentation of the quantitative findings

In this section, the researcher presents a summary of the focal points of the quantitative data in order to test the hypothesis that the current use of Moodle in the M.Ed. in TESOL programme of the HOU does not have the potential of leading to EFL teacher development. Regarding attitudes towards the Moodle platform, an interesting finding was that there was only positive propensity towards the fact that Moodle was a useful software tool (see Table 1) while a high percentage (73,6%) disagreed that the knowledge they got from Moodle was inferior to that of a traditional classroom.

![Table 1: Moodle was a useful software tool](image)

Concerning interactivity and reflection through Moodle, a negative tendency (73%) showed that they did not interact more through Moodle than they would in a traditional class and that reflective thinking was not developed more through Moodle than through traditional classroom (56,9%). About frequency of use in different features of Moodle, it is worth noting that there was an outstanding percentage of 80,6% that attested to the fact that they always used Moodle to submit assignments (see Table 2), 51,4% to download course material (see Table 3) and 52,8% to check course announcements (see Table 4).

![Table 2: I used the platform to submit assignments](image)
Table 3: I used the platform to download course material

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4,2</td>
<td>4,2</td>
<td>4,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very seldom</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5,6</td>
<td>5,6</td>
<td>9,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seldom</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5,6</td>
<td>5,6</td>
<td>15,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasionally</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5,6</td>
<td>5,6</td>
<td>20,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very frequently</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>27,8</td>
<td>27,8</td>
<td>48,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>51,4</td>
<td>51,4</td>
<td>100,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>100,0</td>
<td>100,0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: I used the platform to check course announcements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seldom</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9,7</td>
<td>9,7</td>
<td>9,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasionally</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4,2</td>
<td>4,2</td>
<td>13,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very frequently</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>33,3</td>
<td>33,3</td>
<td>47,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>52,8</td>
<td>52,8</td>
<td>100,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>100,0</td>
<td>100,0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, a positive frequency was expressed towards using Moodle to do assignments (75%), to answer questionnaires (72,3%) and to get feedback (79,1%). Concerning the suggested ways for the use of Moodle, the questionnaire revealed that an outstanding percentage of participants showed a high agreement towards all the suggested uses of the platform with disagreement being confined to very low scores. The highest preference was expressed for using web 2.0 tools (76,4%) (see Table 5) and forums (76,4%) (see Table 6) followed by teleconferences (75%) (see Table 7).

Table 5: I would like Moodle to enhance my learning through the use of web 2.0 tools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1,4</td>
<td>1,4</td>
<td>1,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slightly disagree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2,8</td>
<td>2,8</td>
<td>4,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partly agree</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6,9</td>
<td>6,9</td>
<td>11,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12,5</td>
<td>12,5</td>
<td>23,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>76,4</td>
<td>76,4</td>
<td>100,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>100,0</td>
<td>100,0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Concerning training on the Moodle platform, only a small minority subscribed to the idea that they had received training on the educational use of Moodle before their studies in the HOU while a spectacular consensus view of 94.4% considered basic introductory training on Moodle functionalities useful (see Graph 1).

Finally, as regards frequency of use, the questionnaire replies showed a once a week tendency of use spending an average time of 1-6 hours on it.
4.2. Presentation of the qualitative findings

Most of the above quantitative facts are verified by the interviews with the two tutors and the developer of Moodle. The researcher tapped into the collective wisdom of the interviewees which showed that both tutors agreed that the training offered to them was not adequate so that they could use all the different Moodle tools and that, in order to improve the aspect of communication in the university, they expressed a need for extensive and detailed training. In addition, they had not used tools like forums and wikis, since according to one of them ‘Moodle is a platform only for assignments, grades and for giving material for students to study’. Additionally it was found that the students are reluctant to use the platform, preferring instead, their personal mails or as one tutor commented ‘the channels of communication they are accustomed to’. What is more, they conjointly boosted the idea of a symbiosis of Moodle with contact sessions, a view also espoused by the founder of the platform. Finally, Martin Dougiamas, the founder of the platform, in his interview shed light on the way his platform could be used and among other things he stressed that ‘people learn best when constructing things for others in a social environment’ and that ‘any learning will be improved by giving students more responsibility to create things for their teacher and their peers’.

5. Discussion

5.1. Answering the Research Questions

Based on the sound findings and with regard to the first research question, the quantitative data revealed a positive stance towards the use of the platform, a fact corroborated both by the interviews with the tutors and by an agglomeration of studies in the Greek reality, albeit in different contexts\textsuperscript{11} (Bountouris \textit{et al.}, 2005; Karasavidis, 2003; Kavroumatzis & Fesakis, 2007; Michailidids \textit{et al.}, 2009; Skiadelli, 2008 and Tzimopoulos, \textit{et al.}, 2007). Additionally, the present study revealed that participants see it as a useful tool for learning, an idea also echoed by Abdelrahheem (2012).

Concerning the second research question, Moodle was mainly used to submit assignments, to download course material and to check course announcements corroborating Black \textit{et al.’s} (2007) study in the literature review. The once a week tendency of use on the part of the trainees further confirms the fact that social interaction was not promoted and if it was promoted it was not highly stressed. Tools that reinforce social interaction like forums, chat rooms and wikis were of secondary importance in the trainees’ studies, a finding prominently voiced by Demiris (2010) and Filippidis (2008) showing that the culture of regular communication among trainees has not been developed yet in the HOU (Papazoglou, 2015). Finally, the students used the platform to get feedback, a finding closely connected to Ayakli’\textquoteright s (2003) study which showed that feedback on the assignments was important in the M.Ed. in TESOL programme of the HOU.

\textsuperscript{11} Although the researcher tried hard, she could not find studies which refer to the use of the platform in EFL teacher training contexts in Greece. So she does refer to studies related to the use of the platform but in different contexts.
Regarding the third research question, it was found that the trainees wanted a totally different use of the platform based on interaction and collaboration affirming that in distance education students are more satisfied by the provided education if there is a high degree of interactivity with the teacher trainers (Swan, 2001). Also, in the same vein with Kiriakidis (2007) and Rogers (1999), who jointly claim that the teacher trainers in distance education should develop collaborative approaches of teaching reinforcing interaction, the trainees in the current study expressed a high preference for conversation in forums organized by the trainer. Burns (2011) contests the view that the uses of web 2.0 tools are still limited in the field of teacher professional development so the participants’ manifestation of an impressive conversion towards an interactive and reflective use of Moodle with an emphasis on web 2.0 tools proved an apocalypse.

With regard to the fourth research question, a fact, blatantly obvious from the research, was that the current use of Moodle did not approximate, and satisfy the social constructivist criteria for the development of knowledge thus it did not confirm Abdelrahem’s (2012), Chao’s (2008), Dougiamas and Taylor’s (2003) and Chavan and Pavri’s (2004) studies, presented in section 2.3, which respectively considered the theories of constructivism, social constructivism, constructionism and social constructionism as the main theories behind Moodle. The quantitative results, in line with the qualitative analysis, show that the platform did not promote the philosophies on which it is based and thus it did not enhance learning, extending on the one hand Moreno et al.’s (2007) study in the literature review and confirming Cole and Foster’s (2010) research that Moodle enhances learning on condition that effective educational practices are applied. In conclusion, EFL teacher development was not enhanced because the primary use of Moodle as a high-tech information repository tool and a low or moderate level use of its different tools were identified and a different approach than the highly interactive, discussion-based method favored by most asynchronous online courses appeared. As a result, Lewis et al.’s (2005) study in the literature review, that the key to the effectiveness and efficiency of an online course is the usability of an LMS, was corroborated.

5.2. Implications

The above study was an attempt to bring to the fore insights into the use of Moodle which only recently scholars have begun investigating in Greece. As a result, a number of pedagogical implications that should not be discounted became apparent. First, a pedagogical use of Moodle has been unveiled which will exercise influence for future improvements in the technologically enhanced distance based EFL In-service Teacher Education and Training (INSET) teacher training. Second, the idea that proper training on the use of Moodle bears significance in order to acquire the necessary expertise and confidence needed has been stressed. Third, trainees have been provided with a model of how to exploit pedagogically the platform. Finally, the insights gained could point towards key factors for future investigations in the context of EFL teacher education in Greece while at the same time help university efforts towards the elimination of a limited use of Moodle in higher education.

6. Conclusions

LMSs offer a hitherto undreamed of capacity to control and regulate teaching that has led to an eventual cascade of their adoption by many universities all over the world. In the same
vein, Moodle has established itself as a fixture of the Greek higher education landscape in general and the HOU in particular. The purpose of this small-scale study was to offer insights into the contribution of the current use of Moodle to EFL teacher development. Overall, the findings of this study point unequivocally to the conclusion that Moodle did not promote the philosophies on which it is based since collaborative and constructional learning were not promoted. Additionally, the use of Moodle has done little to enhance EFL teacher development and meet the new needs and challenges of higher education in the 21st century because it was mainly used as a tool set for information distribution and administrative effectiveness. Data point to conclusions that lead us back to internal training and training plans that should favor more Moodle features that contribute to interaction and online collaborative learning because it is believed that without them tutors are still not using fully the LMS technology to improve their teaching practice. In order to reap the benefits of a pedagogically sound use of Moodle, it is incumbent of all people involved to display acuity in recognizing that only by applying effective educational practices can the power of Moodle truly be leveraged. LMSs are here to stay and their rapid uptake among the educational community promises that Moodle will remain a critical area in higher education preparing next generation for a workplace that is growing more wired by the day (Klonoski, 2005). This is a fact that should be seriously taken into account by educators because ‘if we teach today’s students as we taught yesterday’s, we rob them of tomorrow’ (Dewey, 1916).

References


Appendix I: The questionnaire of the research

Questionnaire on the efficacy of Moodle towards in-service EFL teachers’ development in the context of the HOU

Dear colleagues,

My name is Theohari Evangelia and I am a teacher of English in a Primary School as well as a postgraduate student in the MA in TESOL programme of the Hellenic Open University (HOU). I am currently writing my dissertation investigating the efficacy of Moodle towards in-service EFL teachers’ development in the context of the HOU. Since the Moodle platform was first used by the HOU in 2013, this is a questionnaire directed towards the students who have already used this software tool in their studies. As a current or former postgraduate student in the MA in TESOL programme of the HOU yourself, your contribution to the present questionnaire is considered valuable. I would really appreciate it if you could spend a few minutes to complete the following anonymous research tool. The information provided will be kept confidential and will be strictly used for the purposes of this dissertation. This questionnaire consists of seven sections. Please read each instruction and write your answers. This is not a test so there are no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers. The results of this survey will be used only for research purposes so please give your answers sincerely, as only this will guarantee the success of the investigation. Finally, if you need any clarifications or additional information and if you wish to have access to the results of the survey, please feel free to contact me at the e-mail address or telephone number provided.

Thank you in advance for your time and help.

Theohari Evangelia

E-mail: etheoh@gmail.com

Telephone number: [....]

SECTION I-ATTITUDES TOWARDS MOODLE

Following are a number of statements on the attitudes of people towards the Moodle platform with which some people agree and others disagree. Please indicate your opinion honestly after each statement by choosing the answer that best indicates the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Strongly disagree- Disagree-Slightly disagree-Partly agree-Agree-Strongly agree)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Moodle was a useful software tool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I do not have any difficulties using the platform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Moodle increased my motives to learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Moodle made learning more fun to me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The knowledge I got from Moodle was inferior to that of a traditional classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I would recommend others make use of Moodle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7. Moodle addressed my educational needs.

8. I was interested in using Moodle

9. Moodle developed my skills in self-regulation

10. Moodle developed my skills in self-management

11. Moodle optimized the learning process

12. Moodle offered flexibility

13. Moodle increased autonomy

14. I did not find Moodle very cumbersome to use

15. I would like to see Moodle in all my courses

**SECTION II-INTERACTIVITY**

Following are a number of statements on **interactivity promoted through the Moodle platform** with which some people agree and others disagree. Please indicate your opinion honestly after each statement by choosing the answer that best indicates the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Strongly disagree- Disagree-Slightly disagree-Partly agree-Agree-Strongly agree)</th>
<th>1. The Moodle platform provided a learning environment for me and my peers based on social interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Moodle enhanced the interaction with my instructor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Moodle enhanced the interaction with my peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Interactivity in Moodle facilitated learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Interaction gave me the sense of belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Through interaction I got new knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Instead of Moodle I preferred using other channels of communication</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8. I did not hesitate to interact through Moodle
9. I interacted more than I would in a traditional class
10. The Web 2.0 tools of Moodle facilitated contact
11. Rather than read content I interacted and did things with it
12. My learning behavior was best described as collaborative
13. My general competence in the target language was developed through the social character of Moodle
14. Moodle increased my motives in doing team work
15. Interaction helped me get answers to my questions

### SECTION III-REFLECTION THROUGH MOODLE

Following are a number of statements on the **degree of reflection fostered through the Moodle platform** with which some people agree and others disagree. Please indicate your opinion honestly after each statement by choosing the answer that best indicates the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Strongly disagree- Disagree-Slightly disagree-Partly agree-Agree-Strongly agree)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Moodle developed my ability in reflective thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Reflective thinking developed more through Moodle than through traditional classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Moodle encouraged reflective dialogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Moodle allowed me to see the answers of my peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Moodle allowed me to get feedback from my peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Moodle allowed me to create activities for my peers to answer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7. Teacher’s feedback helped me think critically on my answer

<p>| | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**SECTION IV - FREQUENCY OF USE IN DIFFERENT FEATURES OF MOODLE**

Following are a number of statements on the frequency of use in different features of the Moodle platform with which some people agree and others disagree. Please indicate your opinion honestly after each statement by choosing the answer that best indicates the frequency of use.

| (never- very seldom-se;dom-occasionally-very frequently-always) |
| I used the platform to: | | | |
| a) do assignments | | | |
| b) work in wikis | | | |
| c) get feedback | | | |
| d) participate in a discussion forum | | | |
| e) check course announcements | | | |
| f) answer questionnaires | | | |
| g) download course material | | | |
| h) submit assignments | | | |
| i) take quizzes | | | |
| j) participate in a chat room | | | |
| k) ask questions | | | |
| l) do self-assessment activities | | | |
| m) upload material for others to see | | | |
| n) see my peers’ answers | | | |
| o) have social interaction | | | |
| p) send messages | | | |
| q) receive messages | | | |
| r) have peer evaluation | | | |
SECTION V - SUGGESTED WAYS TO ENHANCE LEARNING THROUGH MOODLE

Following are a number of statements on **how you would like to enhance your learning through the Moodle platform**. Please indicate your opinion honestly after each statement by choosing the answer that best indicates your choice (More than one answer is possible)

I would like Moodle to enhance my learning through:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. I would like Moodle to enhance my learning through teleconference</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. I would like Moodle to enhance my learning through interactive exercises on the material</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. I would like Moodle to enhance my learning through videoed material of contact sessions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. I would like Moodle to enhance my learning through model answers from previous years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. I would like Moodle to enhance my learning through the use of web 2.0 tools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. I would like Moodle to enhance my learning through the use of web 2.0 tools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. I would like Moodle to enhance my learning through self-assessment quizzes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h. I would like Moodle to enhance my learning through conversation in forum organized by my teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. I would like Moodle to enhance my learning through follow-up activities after the end of my studies so that I can consolidate what I have learned</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j. I would like Moodle to enhance my learning through follow-up activities after the end of my studies so that I can consolidate what I have learned</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k. I would like Moodle to enhance my learning through construction and sharing of social artifacts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>l. I would like Moodle to enhance my learning through construction and sharing of social artifacts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m. I would like Moodle to enhance my learning through team work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n. I would like Moodle to enhance my learning through reading other students’ online submissions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o. I would like Moodle to enhance my learning through online feedback from my peers on my work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

1. Gender:
   - Male □
   - Female □

2. What is your age range?
   - 22-29 □
   - 30-39 □
   - 40-49 □
   - 50-59 □

3. What is your educational background? (in case of more answers, please tick your highest qualification)
Master’s Degree
Master’s Degree in progress
Doctorate Degree
Doctorate Degree in progress

4. Current employment:
State school
Private school
Private foreign language centre
Private tutoring

5. How many years of teaching experience do you have?
1-5
6-10
11-15
16-20
20+

6. How familiar do you consider yourself with the Moodle platform?
Extremely
very
moderately
slightly
not at all

7. Have you got previous experience on the use of the platform?
YES
NO

8. How many course modules have you completed so far with the help of Moodle?
This is my first module
2 course modules
3 course modules
4 course modules

9. I logged on to Moodle
Daily
Once a week
Once a month

10. What was the average time you spent on Moodle per week?
1-6 hours per week
More than 6 hours per week

11. I had received training on the educational use of Moodle before starting studying in the HOU
YES
NO

12. Basic introductory training on Moodle functionalities would be useful
YES
NO

Thank you very much for your cooperation!
Evangelia Theochari (etheoh@gmail.com) has been a teacher of English since 1996. She worked in foreign language institutes from 1996-2003 and she has been a state EFL teacher both in secondary and primary education since 2003. She holds a B.A. in English Language and Literature from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and a M.Ed. in TESOL from the HOU. Her research interest includes the integration of technology into EFL teacher education.
Conducting action research for written assignments in the M.Ed. in TESOL of the H.O.U: a case study

Marina KOLLATOU

Students who attend the M.Ed. in TESOL of the Hellenic Open University are required to complete a number of written assignments in the course of their studies. In most cases these assignments are based on action research which must be conducted in an English teaching context. This engagement in research aims at transforming the postgraduate students from English language teaching practitioners into researchers thus facilitating the consolidation of the acquired knowledge and fostering a reflective and investigative attitude towards their teaching practices (Cohen et al., 2007). What are the difficulties that a student needs to cope with in order to effectively complete such a research and what are the benefits he or she enjoys in the end? What impact does this practice have on the learners? These questions are answered in this paper which presents a small scale action research conducted in the Greek Senior High School ELT context and in the framework of the module of Testing and Assessment of the M.Ed in TESOL. The research relates to the use of the portfolio, which is recommended by many researchers for the assessment of language skills (Brown, 1998; Genesee and Usphur, 1996; O’ Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996).
1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to add to what research has shown so far regarding the impact that action research has on teaching practitioners when they act as novice researchers in the framework of distance-learning assignments. It actually describes a case study which refers to a small scale action research conducted in a Senior High School context and which is related to the use of the portfolio as an alternative form of assessment of learners’ writing skills. More specifically, the research was intended to investigate whether and how this type of assessment can influence the learners’ writing performance. The research was done in the framework of the module of Testing and Assessment in Language Learning of M.Ed. in TESOL of Hellenic Open University and was a prerequisite for the completion of an assignment. The engagement in this research process triggered a reflective attitude on the part of the researcher which is also described in this paper.

2. Action research in the framework of distance learning assignments

2.1. Action research - a brief review

Action research has been recognized worldwide as an effective practice for teaching practitioners as it helps them theorize and explain what they are doing in the classroom (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). It is claimed that when conducting action research, teaching practitioners not only bring together theory and practice as maintained by Reason and Bradbury (2001) but they also create knowledge and generate theory (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). In fact, they act as researchers while trying to answer questions connected to their job or, in other words, they try to attain the basic goals of any research that is to make claims to new knowledge, test the validity of these claims and generate theory (ibid). This cannot be done unless they apply a certain methodology which needs to be appropriate for each case.

There have been proposed various ways to put an action research into effect. Cohen et al. (2007) offer a review of several procedures for action research like that suggested by Lewin (1946; 1948 in Cohen et al. 2007, p. 304), by Kemmis and McTaggart (1981, ibid:305), or by Atricher and Gstettner (1993, ibid:305) to name but a few. Despite their differences, all suggested procedures share some common characteristics which could be summarized in four basic stages: identifying the problem, planning the intervention, implementing the plan (action) and collecting data, and finally evaluating the success of the intervention. No matter what the suggested procedure is like, action research is characterized by the reflective stance of the teachers involved and their alertness in observing and monitoring the implementation of the plan. Another essential characteristic is that of the collaborative nature of this type of research although it is important that action taken by each individual
member of the research group be critically examined in order that the research goals can be achieved (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988, ibid: 298).

2.2. Distance learning assignments

For most distance learning programmes, written assignments is a common practice. Similarly, students attending the course of Masters of Education in TESOL of the Hellenic Open University are required to complete four written assignments for each module thus making it sixteen assignments during their studies. In most cases these assignments are based on action research which must be conducted in an English teaching context. This engagement in research aims at transforming the postgraduate students from English language teaching practitioners into researchers thus facilitating the consolidation of the acquired knowledge and fostering a reflective and investigative attitude towards their teaching practices as suggested by Cohen et al. (2007).

The importance of these assignments lies not only in the fact that teaching material is consolidated through this applied form of tasks but also in the obligatory character of them since students are not authorized to sit for the exam at the end of the academic year unless they have handed in at least three out of four assignments, provided though, they collected 20 points out of forty in them. Besides, the mark that these assignments take weighs the 30% of the final grade given one passes the exam. All these factors are conducive enough for students to try their best with them.

All assignments are comprehensive and well-structured thus giving students enough guidance as to what they are expected to do. The assignment which is taken as a case study in this paper was about alternative methods of assessment. More specifically, students were asked to experiment with one method of alternative assessment in their classes that is use it for a period of time and then report their experience. Besides, there were given instructions which, to a great extent, described the steps students should take in order to conduct the research and complete their assignment, which was not but the report of their research. In particular, students were asked to reflect on their teaching situation and the language area they would like to measure and provide a rationale for their choice. Finally, they were asked to discuss the procedure they would follow in order to implement the chosen assessment method explaining that they should be observant and explicit in their report about the steps they would take, that is “when”, “how” and “what” they would do as well as the mechanics involved. All these guidelines gradually introduce students into actually conducting a small scale action research and into starting functioning and seeing themselves as researchers besides practitioners.

2.3. Constraints prior to the completion of the assignment

Assignments of this kind are initially perceived as a source of embarrassment and insecurity by the students. One reason for these feelings is lack of experience in functioning as two persons, one planning and doing the actual teaching and one observing, explaining and reporting. This double role appears to be difficult to cope with as teaching time is rather pressing and short. Another reason why these assignments are considered difficult is that there are cases where teachers need to have their school director’s permission or their learners’ parents’ concession to implement an alternative method of assessment for example, which cannot always be taken for granted.
Apart from these rather practical constraints there is always the possibility of lack of awareness on the part of the students of what they are actually about to engage with. No previous appreciation of action research benefits, resistance and doubts about research findings in general may have a detrimental effect on the successful application of the action project. Besides, not being clear about why one should do action research and the possible contributions they can make as well as not knowing how to validate their knowledge claims make the whole endeavor quite uncertain.

3. The use of e-portfolio in assessing level C1 English language learners’ writing skills: a case study

3.1. Identifying the problem

Setting out on this action project, a number of issues had to be considered. One was the amount of time that could be spent on the intervention and one, much more serious than that of time, was the identification of a problem that needed to be treated with the intervention.

Not long before, the process writing approach had been introduced in B class which consisted of twenty 17-year-olds of C1 level at the English language according to the C.E.F.R (Council of Europe, 2001). Based on Pennington’s (1996) claim that word-processor is the ideal tool for process-oriented instruction, learners had started using google docs for their writing assignments as they facilitate multiple drafting, collaborative writing, self and peer reviewing, editing using checklists and finally self-evaluation and instant feedback from the teacher. As a consequence, learners had got accustomed to using technology for their writing assignments. But how could their performance in process writing be assessed? With traditional tests one can assess the product but not the process. It was clear therefore that there was a need for an effective method of assessment of learners’ performance in process writing other than mere testing.

3.2. Planning the intervention

Once the problem was identified, an appropriate method of alternative assessment had to be chosen, implemented and evaluated. Given that the Curriculum for TEFL in Eniaio Lykeio of 1999\(^1\) recommends alternative methods of assessment as supplements to the official testing, it was decided that learners’ writing would be assessed by means of an e-portfolio. To that end, a wiki was designed to serve as an e-portfolio where learners could upload content related to writing. It seemed to be a good idea because it would give learners the possibility to organize their work in a purposeful and systematic way as recommended by Arter and Spandel (1992). What is more, wikis are claimed to facilitate the process writing approach (Lamb, 2004) and as a result, it could be the solution to the problem of assessing writing process, let alone that they help asynchronous comminication (De Pedro et al, 2006) which meant that the problem of the limited time at school could also be solved.

Following Tsagari’s (2004) recommendation, at this stage, learners were informed about the purpose of the e-portfolio integration in the assessment of the skill of writing as well as about its short- and long-term benefits. They were also given the opportunity to see what their e-portfolio would look like and experiment with the wiki functions. Finally, they

discussed the content sections of the portfolio, the time and frequency of entries and the portfolio assessment criteria, as recommended by Kemp & Toperoff (1998) and Delett, et al (2001).

### 3.3. Implementation of the portfolio

The actual implementation of the portfolio lasted two months. During that period, all writing lessons took place in the computer lab where learners could type their writings that is plans, drafts, reviewed and edited texts and upload them all on the wiki. Also, they were encouraged to upload an additional entry they would choose among the written assignments they had done from the beginning of the school year till then as an optional entry. Every after a writing lesson, learners filled out a self-evaluation form for their writing using a Google form and they then uploaded the link on the wiki.

### 3.4. Evaluation of the intervention

At the end of the intervention, the learners presented their e-portfolios and they assessed their portfolios according to the pre-set criteria by filling out a new self-evaluation form. Finally, they participated in a conference agreed upon at the outset of the action project, during which they answered five open-ended questions which aimed at the evaluation of the action taken. More specifically, learners were asked (a) how they felt about using the portfolio as an assessment method for their performance at school, (b) whether they would like the portfolio to be a supplementary to tests method of assessment for all language skills giving or not giving explanations, (c) whether they felt that this portfolio helped them improve their writing skills in English and how, (d) whether they had any and which difficulties in using it, and finally (e) how they felt about assessing their own performance.

### 4. Reflections on the experience of an action research

Conducting an action research always has some difficulties, let alone for a novice researcher and for a teacher-researcher in particular. Especially, when introducing a new method, things become even more complex. In the case described here, apart from teaching and practicing process writing, the teacher-researcher had to support learners in using the wiki effectively, which was not always that simple for all of them, and ensure that that they had complied with the criteria as far as the building of their portfolio was concerned. Time ran so fast that there were hardly any chances of keeping a diary where observations made during the lesson could be noted down. Nor was there anyone to share her concerns and doubts about the way she was doing her work while on task. As a consequence, all conclusions concerning the success of the action project were drawn on the basis of the data collected form the self-evaluation questionnaires and the answers given at the conference.

On reflection, in the case study described in this paper, it was not only the given guidelines in the assignment paper but also the guidance provided by the tutor that facilitated the teacher-researcher during the action project. It was but the tutor’s constant availability and practical advice that encouraged the teacher-researcher to accomplish what she had started. However it would be safer and less stressful if there was a colleague or any volunteer observing and helping with the collection of data or discussing her assumptions with. What is more, it would be beneficial, if there were a platform where all students involved in similar action researches could discuss their methodology or their findings in a systematic way. Taking into account the fact that the course in the framework of which
action research is conducted is a distance-learning one, there could be arranged for students to participate in an e-conference on a regular basis during which they would discuss their reflections, their assumptions, their methods, their problems.

Yet, it was fortunate that in this case all external factors were favorable. In other words, the teacher-researcher’s working position (head-teacher of the school), the availability of the computer lab, the internet access, the learners’ familiarization with the technology, the established teacher-learner relationship, all these worked in favor of the attempt. However, the time that was dedicated to the implementation of the action project was rather short and this led to the decision to continue this research by extending the use of the portfolio for all four skills.

5. Conclusion

The obligation to complete a written assignment which is based on an action project creates the right context for a post-graduate student who also happens to be a teaching practitioner to make the first steps in action research. Research, though, to be effective, must be structured and systematic and its results need to be well-evidenced (Babkie & Provost, 2004). Given the lack of experience, it is not always simple for the practitioner to cope effectively with the double role, that of the teacher and the researcher. Babkie and Provost (ibid) emphasize that teaching comes first and that data collection should never interfere with this. If the teacher’s behavior changes for the sake of the research then the collected data cannot be valid (ibid).

Theoretically all teachers can do research in their classrooms provided they are guided and advised appropriately as to when, where and how they will collect information and how they will use it. The research experience described in this case leads the teacher-researcher, author of this article, to admit having changed the way she now approaches teaching and research. She has come to agree with the claim that “being a teacher-researcher is an efficient way for teachers to effect change in their classrooms, increase student success, and collect data to prove it” (ibid:268). As a result, it can be argued that if a framework of cooperation between universities and schools were built within which school practitioners, guided by university professors, would be transformed into teachers-researchers, major advances would be made in teaching pedagogy both in theory and practice.

References


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Exploring the implementation of CLIL-based Science lessons in the Greek School EFL context

Dimitra HASOGIA & Kosmas VLACHOS

Education, and more specifically foreign language teaching, has to adopt more innovative ways in the teaching process, renew itself and manage to be compatible with the modernized communities in our digital society. The Greek educational system needs a dynamic programme to activate both teachers and students in an attempt to get rid of the conventional and traditional way of teaching and learning. Varied opportunities of learning using innovative concepts of Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and project-based learning are required. CLIL is virtually a tool for the promotion of foreign languages. The purpose of the research presented in this paper is to scrutinize the ways learners could improve their competences and skills during the process of creating a WebQuest project on the basis of applying adequately CLIL-based Science lessons with the aid of ICTs and examine their effectiveness in the Greek Primary School educational arena. Project is a method that leads towards this direction and modern technology provides learners with the opportunity to have access to overwhelming amounts of information. Experiential learning means that students are given the opportunity to use technology, to work in groups and develop intellectual and social skills. Students activate and develop learning strategies which enable them to carry out tasks successfully and become autonomous learners. The research for this study involved sixth grade primary school students.
αφομοίωση της ξένης γλώσσας με έναν τρόπο φυσικό που κινητοποιεί το ενδιαφέρον των μαθητών, την καλλιέργεια της διαπολιτισμικής ευαισθητοποίησης και την περαιτέρω ανάπτυξη των μεταγνωστικών τους δεξιοτήτων.

**Key Words:** Small-scale research, PBL, CLIL, ICTs.

1. Introduction

Due to the expansion of globalization and the increased contact among countries, there is a pure necessity to use the English language in numerous ways and fields. Although more communicative methods have been adopted in the recent years, there is still lack of motivation, cooperation and sincere experience related to a topic for discussion, analysis and presentation. Hence, for this reason the current study accommodates an investigation on the possible ways that Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) can be integrated and implemented in the Greek Primary School educational realm, along with the aid of Information Computer Technologies (ICTs), in an attempt to promote their significance and facilitate the transformation of traditional schools into a ‘modern learning environment’ (Bartek et al., 2016). The purpose of the research focuses mainly on the development of CLIL-based Science lessons with the aid of ICTs. The promotion of CLIL grants regular use of language to research and present information, leading to deep learning in both language and subject area content in the EFL classes.

Furthermore, a WebQuest project is especially designed and applied to young learners fostering collaborative and extensive work based on the existing CLIL Science project. Students are encouraged to practise all four skills (reading etc.), be given a reason for working in a different way comparing to the traditional one, be motivated to work cooperatively and develop critical thinking skills along with electronic literacy skills. Comprehensibility and language development are promoted. Learners are given the chance to acquire both Foundational\(^1\) and New Literacies\(^2\), while they ‘create projects that reflect their knowledge’ (Bell, 2010: 39) via WebQuests.

There exists a potential for accommodating diverse learners. There is also an effort to explore the integrated relationship of content and language integrated learning and advance a more in-depth understanding of this relationship from a social perspective. Language is presented as a primary tool, mediating the construction of knowledge and understanding through individual and collaborative work.

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\(^1\) They concern the writing skill: knowledge in grammar, syntax, vocabulary, along with word-recognition and inferential meaning.

\(^2\) Information literacy through Bawden’s (2008) six stages with the effective use of technology and electronic resources: search information, access, evaluate its quality, organize and use it appropriately.
2. Content Integrated Language Learning (CLIL) as a pervasive innovation in EFL teaching

In the recent years, there has been a worldwide trend in language education, namely by introducing and teaching content subjects employing the English language. This aspect has led to the emergence of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). There exists a debate among educators in the current years and an endless continuum of criticizing EFL theories. They struggle for a more fruitful future for the young learners, based on the fact that youngsters are the promising generation who deserves to be praised and not condemned.

Radical changes in society and the educational system are conducted due to the emergence of the information age (i.e.: the introduction of ICTs in schools’ Educational Programmes supported with technological devices). An unprecedented number of learners are involved in the learning process of content subjects through English. This proves to be a global aspect since CLIL has made its presence in most of the countries all around the world.

The integration of language and other content is not a novice idea. Several subjects or other parts of subjects are taught with the aid of a different or foreign language amalgamating ‘dual-focused aims’ (Marsh, 2000) throughout many European schools for decades. This approach was initially employed in bilingual areas and constitutes a far promising and efficient tool in the promotion of multilingualism, which is more extensively defined as ‘the ability to communicate in different languages’ (Salaberri, 2010:1). This new approach has gained popularity nowadays. The main aspect that CLIL incorporates is the fact that the learners acquire new knowledge about the subject taught (i.e.: Science) through the medium of a foreign language which acts as a vehicle for learning. It is profound that educators tend to integrate not only content and language but also a number of procedures and instructions which, if followed respectively, allow learners to activate their content schemata to address the content meaningfully and then to reproduce applying the L2 effectively.

Taking into consideration that CLIL ‘empowers the automatic change of class dynamics’ (Ting, 2010), we reach the stage where the teacher operates as a facilitator and guide, motivating the students to apply an interactive process while constructing their knowledge. In this way, language competence is gained more effectively if we synthesize both language and content simultaneously, employing various skills, while content knowledge itself is better acquired through ‘problem-solving activities’ (Krashen, 2011).

2.1. The Global Dimension of CLIL

In the novel years, English has been considered as a ‘lingua franca’ (Sifakis, 2004) all around the world and more specifically in the European Union. It is the language used more extensively to fulfill people’s communicative needs. Education, nowadays, is a status quo, not only for the privileged and wealthy citizens but also for all learners coming from various socioeconomic backgrounds.

3 ‘namely the learning of content and the simultaneous learning of a foreign language’ (Marsh, 2000:1).
4 Prior or background knowledge of a subject content activated through the use of L1.
Likewise, the EFL communicative competence remains of prime significance for all the people who intend to exceed in a successful transnational career in a globalised economy which targets to the 21st century multilingual citizens who emerge from a multilingual society. Furthermore, based on the fact that multilingualism is widely spread in the Web, CLIL tends to meet the needs of another social expectation which is the synthesis of real life and the web society. Among the main goals of the European Union’s language policy, multilingualism, the support and preservation of linguistic diversity in Europe, are the most prominent. The promotion of multilingualism concerns both English and non-English countries and this leads in students’ capacity to meet the demands of the educational and social expectations in their country. Content language is in proper dune with linguistic and ‘digital competences’ (Vlachos, 2009). Most of the people on the web communicate using English and non-English web pages which is undoubtedly increasing the demand for ‘multilingual-oriented learning practices’ (Agolli, 2013), leading to CLIL and its inexhaustible uses. CLIL as pedagogical concept involves making practice of more than one foreign language as a vehicle to teach subjects (i.e.: Geography, Science, History etc.) in the school curriculum.

2.2. The Nature of CLIL: Learning theories and the 4Cs

The Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) initiative has experienced a significant growth since it is being integrated into curricula all across Europe. The domain of applying language is regarded as ‘one of the basic skills that everyone should acquire in European educational spaces during the course of their learning life’ (Council of Europe, 2001). CLIL has been introduced in the educational systems in most of the European countries in the last decades and the issue of CLIL has been discussed and examined both for its ‘macro vs micro and product vs process dimensions’ (Dalton-Puffer, Nikula & Smit, 2010).

CLIL is introduced as an umbrella term to underpin the common features which can be found in bilingual teaching, as well as its applications and practices worldwide. Among various definitions provided for this new method of instruction Marsh (2002) describes CLIL as ‘an approach or method’ which is applied for the simultaneous learning of the content and the learning of a foreign language. The generic term CLIL refers to any learning activity where ‘language is used as a tool to develop new learning from a subject area or theme’ (Coyle et al., 2009:6).

In order to get a grasp of the theoretical concepts of CLIL, the experts presented the combination of ‘multiple methodologies applied to support language’ (Coyle et al., 2010:3) that prove to be ideal for CLIL contexts. The language has to be learned in a natural context either it is addressed through a focus on meaning or a focus on form. This approach proves to be valuable for ESL methodologies since there are non-distinguishable boundaries and the 4Cs framework, whose components are content, cognition, communication and culture, is presented in order to understand the main principles of CLIL matrices embedded in the teaching and learning usage.

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5 CLIL is a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the language learning and the teaching of both content and language with the intention of cultivating the mastery of both content and language to pre-defined levels.
6 English as a Second Language.
2.2.1. Communication in CLIL: The CLIL matrix and The Language Tryptich

Communication appears to be one of the four key principles (Coyle, 2002: 27-28) that CLIL promotes. Language is considered a ‘conduit for communication and learning’ (ibid: 27-28). To conceptualize, communication is a CLIL variable instilled into two major language theories conceiving learning as a natural process. According to Krashen’s Input Hypothesis, learning is presented as an attainable acquisition process, provided that learners are exposed to comprehensible input, improve and progress not only along the natural order of the utterances but with the messages they are conveying.

To this notion, three different concepts of language learning should be taken into account and presented in a triangle formation called the Language Triptych (Coyle, Hood and Marsh, 2010).

a) **Language of Learning** is necessary for learners to access the basic concepts and skills of any given topic. Thus, language of learning is subject-specific as ‘previous knowledge is activated in a meaningful environment’ (Van de Craen and Surmont, 2017:26).

b) **Language for Learning** is subject-compatible and focuses on the language which students adapt to carry out classroom tasks interactively.

c) **Language through Learning** promotes students’ active involvement of language and thinking through ‘scaffolding’ (ibid: 26)

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7 It is used in authentic and unrehearsed yet scaffolded situations to complement the more structured approaches common in foreign language lessons. CLIL serves to reinforce the notion that language is a tool which to have meaning and sense needs to be activated in contexts which are motivating for and meaningful to our learners (ibid: 27-28).

8 The Input Hypothesis is Krashen’s attempt to explain how the learner acquires the second language.

9 “Acquisition requires meaningful interaction in the target language – natural communication in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding.”

10 ‘Scaffolding is a teaching method that requires the teachers to support the learner in bringing the gap between what is already known and mastered and what is yet unknown and not yet mastered’ (Van de Craen and Surmont, 2017:26)
Since the language presented in CLIL does not coincide with the grammatical development we can find in an ordinary language learning context, we consider it an advantage as we acquire knowledge in a natural way similar to the one used in our mother tongue. With respect to the theory aforementioned, in CLIL classrooms language is the medium through which content is transported. According to Swain’s Output Hypothesis\(^\text{11}\), learners are engaged in opportunities for equal participation and develop their ‘linguistic competences’ (Chomsky, 1965), following the input-process output way of interaction and effective communication (CEFR, 2001). More specifically, learners initially manage to ‘communicate effectively in real-life oral communication’ (Grammatikopoulou, 2016:616) and afterwards ‘become competent readers and writers in the target language (L1 or L2)’ (ibid: 616). Hence, learners’ communication is auspiciously acquired when learning to use the language is relied on elements such as ‘authentic, scaffolded situations, developing skills, strategies and competences’ (Kofou and Philippides, 2017: 123).

This immediately results in the cultivation of communicative competence which can be transcended to the Task Based Learning\(^\text{12}\) approach (Willis, 1996; Ellis, 2003). In order to implement the communicative elements effectively, teachers are required to employ strategies referring to language and meaning which include numerous techniques for meaning comprehension.

More chances for communication, in all education ranks, are prevailed via the PBL\(^\text{13}\) approach as learners interact using authentic contexts and are free to use linguistic

\(^{11}\) He proposes that ‘through producing language either spoken or written language acquisition may occur’ (Swain, 1985: 159).

\(^{12}\) TBL: For Willis(1996: 23) a task is an activity “where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome”.

\(^{13}\) Project Based Learning is a comprehensive perspective focused on teaching by engaging students in investigation. Within this framework, students pursue solutions to nontrivial problems by asking and refining questions, debating ideas, making predictions, designing plans and/or experiments, collecting
resources they have searched for, as well as reflect on what they have learned. Project work involves real-life communicative situations and promotes a higher level of thinking than just learning vocabulary and grammatical structures. Project work allows active participation in classrooms and numerous chances for inexhaustible learning. This leads to what John Dewey’s (1859-1952) motto: “Education is not a preparation for life; education is life itself”.

3. The use of technology: WebQuests

As the world of technology is rapidly changing, the idea of ‘integrating the use of the World Wide Web’ (Dodge, 1995) in classroom activities, led us to the use of WebQuests. Bernie Dodge designed WebQuests in 1995 (Dodge, 2007) aiming at ‘utilizing the vast information on the Internet’ (Polly and Ausband, 2009: 29) in a well-performed and meaningful way.

WebQuests are activities that ‘follow a predictable format’ (Mangelson and Castek, 2008: 46) and can be applied for any grade level. They are designed to ‘transform newly acquired information into a more sophisticated understanding’ (ibid: 46). They foster ‘collaborative problem solving’ (Sox and Rubinstein-Avila, 2009: 39), permitting students to work on tasks and reach a ‘cumulative project’ (ibid: 39). The use of authentic tasks with the help of information which derives from the Internet enables students engage in inquiry-oriented activities, develop critical thinking skills along with electronic literacy skills. Most of the times the webquest tasks tend to simulate situations related to the real world. Thus, students are required to take on roles, design, persuade the other students through discussion and collaboration, reach a consensus and develop a final product.

Due to their flexibility, they have ‘great potential for accommodating diverse learners’ (Sox and Rudinstein-Avila, 2009: 39) especially ELLs14 who are encouraged to delve into the given topic both individually and cooperatively. These exchanges tend to ‘foster deeper levels of reasoning and understanding’ (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2000), promote comprehensibility and language development.

Krashen (1980) proposed that ELLs perform better when ‘language competencies are integrated with and taught through content’ (Sox and Rubinstein-Avila, 2009: 40). Echevarria et.al. (2000) mentioned that students should be provided with clear instructions, comprehensible and well-organised tasks. Emphasis was placed on the use of visuals, appropriate input (articles, parts from books, newspapers etc.). For this reason, the webquest becomes not only student centered but also supports ‘scaffolding’15 through well-structured task activities for the learners to organize their newly acquired knowledge.

However, it is essential to examine the primary school students’ attitude towards webquest and its applications. Ikpeze and Boyd (2007) proposed comprehension strategies such as chunking, skimming and scanning texts on the Internet while learners work on the webquest. Webquests’ ‘curricular elements’ (Sox and Rubinstein-Avila, 2009) should be evaluated before being introduced to class. Previous research indicates that students are and analyzing data, drawing conclusions, communicating their ideas and findings to others, asking new questions, and creating artifacts”(Blumenfeld, et al., 1991).

14 English-language learners.
15 Four types of scaffolds are suggested: conceptual, metacognitive, procedural and strategic that may be used to support resource-based learning (Hill and Hannafin, 2001).
influenced by ‘factors such as prior knowledge and self regulation strategies’ (MacGregor, 1999) which affects their ability to collect and negotiate the information available on the websites.

Wenglinsky (1998) argued that the integration of technology requires teachers to design and facilitate learning experiences which promote students’ ‘higher-order thinking skills’ (HOTS)16 (Lewis and Smith, 1993: 136). Hence, Webquest focus on HOTS and are organized to meet these criteria a webquest includes: ‘an introduction, a task, a process, an evaluation and a conclusion’ (Polly and Ausband, 2009: 29).

Students take ownership during the webquest, control the appropriate information gathered (input) through the web and form the final product (output) after having applied all categories17 of thinking (transformation). Last but not least, if students become aware of their own thinking patterns and develop effective learning strategies, they will be promoted as independent, expert learners.

4. Methodology: Blending Theoretical perspectives with research practice

This current research includes the combination of theory, research and pedagogical aspects, along with their independent interaction which serve as a profitable feedback on the linear process of the present study.

4.1. Research Questions

The following research questions facilitate the process of exploitation:

- CLIL-based classes and ICTs: How effective and productive can this combination be in a primary school environment?
- Which of these language learning skills (i.e.: reading/listening/speaking/writing) are improved during the teaching process of CLIL-based lessons with the aid of ICTs?

4.2. The Setting and the Participants

As already mentioned, this small-scale research is of prior importance as we should take into account feasibility issues in terms of time, the natural place where the actual study is materialized, along with the respondents’ availability. Respectively, a ‘convenient sampling strategy’ (Dornyei, 2007:129) was employed, as it is quite practical for the teacher-researcher to conduct her experiment with the groups of students accessible in her classes. For this reason, this small-scale research took place in the 1st Primary School of Markopoulo in Athens.

The CLIL subject was Science, so the students have to be taught science through the medium of the English language (L2) or in some cases (L3) because English was the third language being taught (L1: mother tongue, L2: Greek etc.) for six students. The school belongs to the public sector, so the current teaching situation involves two multilingual, heterogeneous

56 HOTS have been defined in the literature as ‘occurring when a person takes new information and information stored in memory and interrelates or rearranges and extends this information to achieve a purpose or find possible answers in perplexing situations.
57 Content thinking, critical and creative thinking (Crawford and Brown, 2002).
classes consisting of 48 students, aged 11-12. Their linguistic competence in English tends to be altered on the grounds that the target language level varies from A1 ‘Breakthrough’ to A2 ‘Waystage’ including few exceptions of students reaching the B1 ‘Threshold’ level according to CEFR (2001). Acting as non-native speakers, they sometimes use the L1 in the classroom in an effort to fulfill certain communicative needs. They form dynamic classes willing to participate in innovative and challenging encounters. Students with special needs (i.e.: dyslexia etc.) are also included in some of the groups. They are divided in six groups of four students in each class which allows them to work either in pairs or forming groups. Most of them are computer literate which means that they managed to complete their mini WebQuest project as a form of alternative assessment, instead of a Science test, at the end of the CLIL lessons. The presentation of the students’ work on wikispaces was successfully performed partially in the classroom or at students’ homes.

4.3. Instruments applied for data collection

As mentioned above, an important aspect of the research approach is to conduct an investigation of the contemporary phenomenon (i.e.: CLIL and ICTs cline) in ‘its natural setting and to gain insight into the participants’ perspective’ (Borg et al., 2003:436). Small-scale research mainly involves collecting a significant amount of data (Borg et al., 2003:437). As (Dornyei, 2007) states a ‘mixed methods research combining both quantitative and qualitative techniques focuses on providing a more detailed and prevailing picture ensuring more reliability. Thus, the quantitative approach is conducted though the use of two sequential questionnaires (i.e.: pre- and post-course) with the prospect of gathering ‘quantifiable data in respect of a number of variables which are then examined to discern patterns of association’ (Bryman, 1989:104) and leading to more precise data collected for ‘more objective interpretations’ (Dornyei, 2007:26). Moreover, the qualitative approach, which is implemented in this research, tries to ‘create a deep and complete description an understanding of human experiences or phenomena’ (Lichtman, 2010:12). In-depth questions such as ‘why’ and ‘how’ are raised to ‘generate meaning, understanding and description, which is interpreted by the researcher (ibid: 12). Interviews based on the ‘participants self-report’ (Borg et al., 2003:254) and observation of learners in natural settings (i.e.: school classroom and ICT lab) are ‘common ways to collect data in qualitative research’ (Lichtman, 2010:5).

All these result in a more ‘naturalistic, inductive, contextualized and respectful of the participants’ views’ data collection (Hyland, 2002: 157). This small-scale research makes an attempt to find and clarify the benefits of employing ICTs in a CLIL educational setting, exploiting both quantitative and qualitative methods of research, resulting in a methodological triangulation which may ‘provide richness and detail or initiate new interpretations’ (Dornyei, 2007:30). It is worthwhile to mention that this application of triangulation may augment the collection of information from two or more sources which enhance the ‘trustworthiness of the analysis’ (Gorard & Taylor, 2004:43), increasing the validity of the conducted research. The first method is a pre- and post- course addressed to the 6th primary school students, an observation checklist and finally an interview that is based on the participants’ self report. All these measurement instruments will be presented and discussed accordingly.
5. Results and Discussion of the Research Study findings

It is apparent that data analysis is a key element that provides a meticulous anatomy and guarantees the maximum of validity. The key findings of the research are presented and discussed below.

5.1. Learners main preferences as regards CLIL based classes and the use of ICTs

Fortuitously, the survey tools of this research have shed light on the positive impact CLIL and ICTs can have for young learners. Both questionnaires confirmed the researcher’s expectations that most of the students expressed their preference to study Science (i.e.: the content subject) in the English language (L2), develop their listening, reading, speaking, writing and higher-order thinking skills, become digitally competent and were motivated to collaborate with their classmates for the attainment of their WebQuest project (App. I, p. 23).

Their positive attitudes towards the WebQuest project was significant in light of Krashen’s (1982) affective ‘filter hypothesis’ whenever students are interested and motivated, they are more likely to welcome new input and assimilate the target language. They anticipated that their knowledge of the topic and of their foreign language would be enhanced. The evaluation of all these findings is analysed in the following sub-sections.

The data from the second Questionnaire (App. II, p. 24) demonstrated that instead of using the internet for individual purposes, students considered worthwhile getting involved in realistic contextualized activities as the idea of a WebQuest was ideal. The sixth grade learners succeeded in developing their cooperative skills which become apparent through classroom observation data, either in the classroom or in the computer lab. When Vygotsky (1978), through his social constructivist theory introduced the importance of learning through interaction with others, we can clearly figure out what he meant. Learners could not ignore the fact that being active rather than passive members of the class community enabled them to achieve and fulfill their preset goals. Even if they seemed hesitant in the beginning, while operating their computers to deal with problem-solving tasks, find adequate information and provide answers, ICTs proved to be a priceless tool for all the learners. Enjoyment, active participation and a great sense of achievement led to the completion of the WebQuest project based on the CLIL lessons. The data collected from the interview (App. II, p. 24) with the students, extensively supported the successful implementation of the CLIL lessons and the Web Quest because students had the opportunity to express themselves, their feelings and anxieties during the completion of the CLIL experiment via the use of technologies. Using the zunal webtool, the researcher not only brought motivation in the classroom but also permitted the students to avoid the risk of being at a loss browsing at irrelevant websites with inappropriate content. Working in pairs or in groups, learners managed to articulate their beliefs and ideas, raise questions while asking for the teacher’s encouragement and support. Students could be benefitted from the concept of dealing with a presupposed problem which requires the learners to be exposed to real-life situations in order to develop any possible solutions.

In the same vein, the learners’ self-confidence was augmented and achieved gaining a higher level in the English language in relation to content learning (i.e.: simultaneous exposure to Science and English). To put it in another way, ‘Linguistic competence helps in the
acquisition of content knowledge, and the content knowledge can make input more comprehensible, which helps the development of linguistic proficiency (Krashen, 2011:7). All in all, the CLIL experiment with the aid of ICTs seemed more exciting for learners and far more challenging in comparison to the traditional language lessons in a Primary School environment.

5.2. **CLIL and the development of Language Learning Skills**

Studies have indicated that the positive impact of CLIL on the target language development is prominent in both primary and secondary education. To start with, in our case, the receptive skills\(^{18}\) are influenced positively due to the sequential exposure with the aid of ICTs\(^{19}\). As far as the productive skills\(^{20}\) are concerned, they seem to be benefitted because learners manage to collaborate, interact in pairs or groups and eventually create their written pieces of work.

During the interview, learners reported about their success to develop their speaking skills. Classroom observation has indicated students’ active involvement throughout the learning process where interaction through realistic tasks was eminent, conceiving a reason to communicate. Project work enabled them to cultivate their reading skills\(^{21}\) whilst being entangled in real-life situation activities. The written output was a combination of appropriate vocabulary, proper selection of photos and right structure. Obviously the CLIL approach transformed cognitive engagement to effective language learning via higher-order thinking skills development. Moreover, the use of ICTs, as a source of information supported the materialization of the assigned project.

6. **Concluding Remarks**

Motivated and affected by the prevailing needs of the Greek educational realm, this research study aimed at amalgamating two basic components: CLIL as a novel application and the use of ICTs. This present study has indicated that CLIL and ICTs can have a positive impact on young learners. The coexistence of CLIL continuum and ICTs satisfied learners’ needs, preferences and expectations while their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills were gradually developed. Through the medium of the WebQuest project, learners were exposed to real life situations and promoted their higher-order thinking skills. Students’ communicative abilities were improved since their motivation, self-confidence and willingness to participate actively in the demanding topic of Science were enhanced, moulding new learning individuals, more digitally aware to implement any novel ideas. Cooperation and collaboration among peers were advocated. Enjoyment, effective involvement and a great sense of achievement were augmented. The levels of anxiety and stress were reduced for all learners and more specifically for those with special needs. Linguistic and content competences seemed to result from learners’ continuous exposure to the L2. Last but not least, interactive and metalinguistic skills were promoted.

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\(^{18}\) i.e.: reading and listening.
\(^{19}\) i.e.: videos, powerpoint presentations, songs, online texts etc.).
\(^{20}\) i.e.: speaking and writing.
\(^{21}\) i.e.: online text reading.
Having presented that WebQuests are ‘a student-centered and project-based approach to teaching and learning’ (Teclehaimanot and Lamb, 2004), it is therefore eminent to claim that if learners use their critical and creative thinking, promote cooperative and engaged learning for the production of authentic output, along with excitement, they can enjoy the benefits of differentiated curriculum.

References


APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: A WEBQUEST LESSON PLAN

A WebQuest project based learning lesson

Students
Two classes of 24 students, A1-A2 (the majority), age range 11-12 (6th grade of primary school)
Main aim
Encouraging students to practise all their skills through a new designed Webquest project-based learning lesson, following the process of a project. Introducing new elements and integrating skills development
Difficulties anticipated
Students should be given the reason for working in a different way, comparing to the traditional one they use so far and be motivated to produce a well-formed final product (output) in a power point presentation (or even create a poster), after following all the appropriate steps
Timetable fit
Students have recently been involved in classroom discussion applying CLIL-based lessons over the issue related to Energy, its sources and the six types of alternative sources of energy which can cause a radical change to our world if applied more extensively. Moreover, certain problems are raised for discussion and ways of people’s active involvement are mentioned, in an effort to use these alternative sources of energy for the people’s benefit not only in Greece but all around the globe
Teaching material
Videos (from you tube), students’ worksheets with relevant material and hyperlinks for further and specific information to seek in order to complete each step of the given task using all the resources provided

Appendix II

A. Interview Questions for 6TH Grade Learners and their responses (sample)
   1. Did you like the Webquest project?
      - We liked it very much although it was quite strange in the beginning
      - At first, we faced some difficulties because there were many sites we had to search and find information. Though, with some guidance we managed to complete the project work
      - It was interesting, more helpful as we didn’t search the internet alone to collect information for our project

B. Needs Analysis Questionnaire: Results - Graphic Presentations
1. I would like to be taught Physics in the English language

2. I would like to use ICTs for the presentation of the Physics lessons

3. I would like to use ICTs during the English classes
4. I would like to collect information with the aid of my English teacher

5. I think it is easy to read authentic texts through the internet

6. I like reading English texts in my English book
7. I like reading English texts on the internet

8. It is easy to use the internet while having an assignment

9. I don’t think English classes are interesting without the use of ICTs
10. I would like to have a project based on a WebQuest

11. I would like to cooperate with my classmates

12. I would like to work on a project doing some pair or group work and publish the output on a website
13. Would you like to present your project to the other students in your school with the aid of ICTs?

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<td>20.83%</td>
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13. I would like to present my project to the other students with the aid of ICTs

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Greek EFL teachers’ views and practices regarding teaching and the factors affecting them: a mini scale research

Maria GIDARAKOU

This report describes a dissertation research among Greek EFL teachers, focusing on their views and their classroom decisions as well as the factors influencing them. Emphasis is given on the research tools used for collecting data as well as their characteristics, advantages and limitations. The research tools chosen were the web questionnaire and the one-to-one interview. The questionnaire was distributed in EFL teachers’ groups and one-to-one interviews were based on convenience (Dornyei, 2003). The problems that arose during the research involved the relatively low total number of participants (105), the skipping of a few web questions by some teachers and the small sample of certain subgroups of teachers. Another problem that arose was the search of strong questionnaires already tested as a basis of the research. Despite all these, the research questions were answered, with some suggestions put forward at the end of the paper.

Key words: convenience sampling, web questionnaire, one-to-one interview
1. Introduction

Teacher education and professional development is an important issue for scholars and teachers alike. There is quite a lot of research in this field regarding the views and practices of teachers after their studies and training, as well as the reasons for any possible changes or stability in them. The dissertation this paper is based on focused on this question, taking into consideration Greek EFL teachers from various workplaces and qualifications. The research lasted seven months and it included two tools: the web questionnaire and the one-to-one interview.

The research in this field is quite substantial and has concluded that trainee teachers’ experiences affect the way they teach (Borg, 2003; Karavas & Drossou, 2009; Karavas & Drossou, 2010; Sifakis, 2009; Sifakis & Sougari, 2007), since fresh ideas explored in teacher education studies and programs do not easily replace the deeply rooted ones (Harwell, 2003). According to a research by Sifakis & Bayyurt (2016), trainee teachers might want to change indeed (supporters), whereas others implement new ideas in their teaching (risk takers) and some others begin their training with a positive attitude but give up when their training period ends; in other words, an “immunization process” (Hiver & Dornyei, 2015). Other researchers’ work has made another distinction in the subgroups of trainee teachers: the ones who undergo little change after the training process has been completed (Mattheoudakis, 2007; Peacock, 2001); the ones who claim that changes can be caused indeed (Bramald et al., 1995; Debreli, 2012); and, finally, the ones who think that changes can be produced under specific circumstances (Tatto, 1998) or up to a certain point (Aagathopoulou, 2010; Karavas & Drossou, 2009).

This body of research, though it is quite diverse and rich regarding teacher attitudes towards their training process, does not specify what happens after some years of teaching experience, especially in Greece and regarding some aspects. Is it possible that teachers take other factors into consideration (like the coursebook, curriculum and the school guidelines), as well? Are interests and needs considered important when planning a lesson? Finally, what can be said about teacher beliefs and practices? Are there any factors affecting them? And what could be said about the methodologies implied? Could these beliefs and practices be described as modern, traditional or a combination of both? These were the research questions which this mini scale research was based on.

As in all cases of mini scale research, there were both some strong points and some limitations which had to do with the research questions and the process of the survey itself. This paper focuses on the limitations as well as some suggestions for any further improvement.

2. The research

2.1. The nature of the study

Writing a dissertation is the strongest challenge for a postgraduate student, since it is their first small scale research of major importance—at least for most of them. Any prior assignments completed by the students contribute little to the bulk of work they have to undertake, because the dissertation is longer and thus needs more theoretical background, extended research and, quite often, statistical analysis. For these reasons, the students have two options: they can either find dissertations to use as guides or cooperate with their supervisors. The former might produce unsafe results, since it is unknown whether the
procedure followed by their authors was the correct, whereas the latter largely depends on the willingness of the supervisor to help and guide.

The procedure of this research was supported to a great extent by the supervisor, who gave the researcher valuable advice on writing the paper and the research questions, deciding on the nature of the tools as well as discussing the results and the text itself. In light of these, having already referred to the research questions in the previous section, the first aspect to be discussed below is the tools.

2.2. The tools

The first and most important research tool was the web questionnaire. As in most research papers, it is the quickest, cheapest and most convenient way of collecting data, since it takes little time to design, send and get back at no cost and with less time pressure for both the designer and the interviewee. Apart from the final deadline, after which the researcher has to process the answers and draw the conclusions, the respondents need not hurry to complete the questionnaire at a certain time of the day (e.g. during a school break or an interviewer’s visit), so it is much easier to collect answers this way.

The second tool which was used was the one-to-one interview. The questions for the interview were the research questions themselves (Creswell, 2002) and the interviewees were chosen based on convenience, i.e. geographical proximity and possible availability at the time of the research (Dornyei, 2003). Of the twenty potential participants nine were able to answer the interview questions. The one-to-one interview has the benefit of giving the interviewee the opportunity to ask for clarifications and make any possible corrections based on them (which is not possible in cases of written questionnaires after they have been submitted).

2.3. The participants

The participants in this research were 105 in total. 96 of them answered the web questionnaire whereas 9 participated in the one-to-one interview. All of them had some years of teaching experience (i.e. none of them was still a university student), with various educational backgrounds (i.e. C2 certificate holders, Bachelor Degree holders and Master Degree students/graduates) and places of work (public or private sector). The web questionnaire was distributed via snowball sampling, a method which has participants forward the questionnaire to other colleagues after they have answered it themselves (Dornyei, 2003), whereas the one-to-one interviews were conducted based on availability and proximity at the time of the research, as already mentioned (Dornyei, 2003).

2.4. Data analysis and discussion

The data collected from all participants was grouped and processed by a statistical analysis tool (SPSS). The results showed that teachers use elements from both methods, with a slight preference to the modern ones. Therefore, even though teachers seem to be participating and implementing new methodologies in their teaching, they have not rejected the traditional ones entirely. This result is in accordance with the researchers’ results mentioned previously, which claim that changes can occur under certain circumstances (Tatto, 1998) or up to a point (Agathopoulou, 2010; Karavas & Drossou, 2009).
As far as the rest of the factors are concerned, teachers seem to take into consideration learners’ interests and needs as well as the curriculum and the school owner guidelines, but not the coursebook, since most of the participants do not follow it strictly. There has also been a correlation between place of work and preference of certain teaching practices: for instance, language school teachers seem to use text translation from English to Greek (and vice versa), whereas private school teachers tend to integrate skills as far as reading is concerned by using information to do a different task at the post-reading stage. In addition, they also seem to encourage authentic communication as far as writing skills are concerned. No other tendency is concluded to be related to a certain subgroup of teachers, apart from a remarkable comment made by public sector teachers, which is the lack of equipment or the internet as means to assist their teaching.

3. Limitations

The first limitation of the survey was the number of participants. 105 people make a sample large enough for some conclusions, but not large enough for any kind of generalization. This is due to the fact that this research had a time limit of less than a year and the questionnaire took some time to design, test and send. In addition, not all potential participants answered promptly, so it took a little more time and kind reminders for the researcher to be able to collect a satisfactory amount of data and process it in the time limits.

The process of searching for strong and valid questionnaires was also time consuming, because not all researchers had published their questionnaires and even fewer of them had areas of research similar to the ones of the researcher of this paper. Therefore, more than one questionnaire was needed, in addition to a few new questions written by the postgraduate student herself. The sources of this questionnaire were a study by Karavas & Drossou (2010) and another one written and distributed to Greek EFL teachers who work in public schools (Psaltou-Joycey, 2015). Both of these questionnaires, in addition to the final one distributed to the teachers of our survey, are attached in the appendices of the dissertation (Gidarakou, 2017).

As far as other limitations are concerned, the number of participants (105) was enough for some tendencies to be displayed, but as in all cases of mini scale research, larger numbers of participants would produce safer and perhaps more various results. For instance, the groups of C2-level certificate holders and private school teachers represented about one out of ten respondents (6.1% & 5.1% respectively), so any tendencies revealed concerning them in particular are less safe than the rest of the results.

Last but not least, there were some questions of the web questionnaire left unanswered, but they were so few that the results were not affected in any way. Nevertheless, in a larger scale research that might be a serious deficiency.

4. Suggestions

The problem of finding already published, valid questionnaires as a basis for a new research is not an easy task for the researcher, since it depends on the willingness of the author of the original questionnaire to publish or send it to the student. It is therefore a matter of personal effort on the part of the amateur researcher and willingness on the part of the more experienced one to search for and share their knowledge respectively, so little can be done by a third part to oblige any of the two to do anything beyond their powers.
As for the participation or prompt response of the interviewees, it is also a matter of personal willingness, so what can be done to face this problem is send kind reminders from time to time (which is already a practice) or perhaps a longer time span, if this is possible on the part of the institution or the supervisor.

Last but not least, concerning the results of the paper itself, as in all cases of mini scale research, future research including larger samples can either confirm or reject all small such studies. However, since this is also the case for larger studies, it is not as urgent as the steps already outlined, since readers and supervisors are aware of the fact that no mini postgraduate mini research can produce spectacular results.

5. Conclusion

Mini scale-type research such as dissertation papers is quite a demanding task, with tools assisting the student but also limitations that are revealed, which the researcher has to overcome so that the research is not seriously hindered. Time, sample and strong questionnaires are very important, so if they are enough and satisfactory, with the supervisor’s help, the paper written can be a positive result in many ways.

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Conducting academic research for a dissertation:
the perspective of a graduate on available tools
and difficulties encountered

Valentina PEROUKIDOU

In the field of higher education, academic research is an integral part of acquiring a university degree, since students engage in some form of research both during their studies and in the completion of their dissertations. During the course of their studies, reviewing literature for each module or course sets the basis for enabling the students to develop a critical stance towards the course content as well as completing written assignments successfully. Furthermore, during the final part of their studies, when students have to complete their dissertations, conducting academic research to review the relevant literature and field research to acquire the necessary data are pivotal steps in the process; nonetheless, they may frustrate and overwhelm students if not organized properly. The present article provides a description of the process of doing research in the context of the post-graduate programme for the Master's in education (M.Ed.) in The Teaching of English as a Foreign/International Language offered by the Hellenic Open University (HOU). The process is described from the perspective of a graduate and focuses on the relation of academic research to technology, the role of the tutors and the difficulties encountered, while it also provides some suggestions to assist students/researchers.
στα πλαίσια του προγράμματος μεταπτυχιακών σπουδών στην εκπαίδευση (Μ.Εδ.) στην Διδασκαλία της Αγγλικής ως Ξένης/Διεθνούς Γλώσσας που προσφέρεται από το Ελληνικό Ανοιχτό Πανεπιστήμιο (ΕΑΠ). Η διαδικασία περιγράφεται από τη σκοπιά μιας αποφοίτου και εστιάζει στη σχέση μεταξύ ακαδημαϊκής έρευνας και τεχνολογίας, τον ρόλο των Καθηγητών-Συμβούλων και τις δυσκολίες που αντιμετωπίστηκαν, ενώ παράλληλα παρέχει κάποιες προτάσεις για να συνδράμει τους φοιτητές/ερευνητές.

**Key words:** distance education, written assignments, dissertations, academic research, technology.

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### 1. Introduction

Research is defined as ‘a process of systematic inquiry that is designed to collect, analyze, interpret, and use data [..] in order to understand, describe, predict, or control an educational or psychological phenomenon or to empower individuals in such contexts’ (Mertens, 2010: 2). In educational contexts, particularly in the field of higher education, research is a *sine qua non* factor when it comes to completing a university degree, since in most cases a dissertation needs to provide the results of original research.

Most research projects, irrespective of the type of research they include (field, action, small-scale or large-scale) follow the hourglass model in terms of structure (Trochim, 2006). According to this model, the researcher initially starts with a broad area of interest and then narrows this area down by determining the research questions or hypothesis. After the research has been designed and conducted, the researcher uses the collected data and analyzes the results in order to come to conclusions, thus broadening the area of interest once again. In this process, academic research is vital in the initial stage, since it is only through reviewing the relevant research that the student can decide on the research questions or hypothesis to focus on. Subsequently, the design of the research will dictate the way the research will be conducted. At this point, the student needs to be knowledgeable about research design, the tools and methods s/he can employ not only to collect, but also to analyze the gathered data.

Needless to say, technology is a very useful tool for the researcher in all of the stages mentioned above. Nonetheless, the assistance and guidance of tutors should not be underestimated, as they often help students overcome the various obstacles that arise and provide the moral support the students need.

This article aims at describing the process of completing a dissertation at a post-graduate level, focusing on academic research and its relation to technology, the difficulties encountered and ways in which they can be overcome. However, the fact that no quantitative or qualitative research was conducted to research the practices of other students in the process of writing their dissertations is a limitation, since there is no formal way to confirm the writer’s views.

### 2. Academic research in Distance Education

During the last thirty years, the evolution of distance education and the popularity it gained has changed the scene of higher education (Bers, 1999). The rapid advances in technology
and the development of the World Wide Web made it possible for a vast number of people to access courses in educational institutions from all over the globe.

Following global trends, a number of institutions in Greece have started using distance education techniques in order to organize educational and vocational courses in recent years. Apart from the development of ICT technologies, the amelioration of the infrastructure regarding telecommunications has resulted in the participation of many higher education institutes in information networks about open and lifelong learning. An example of such a network is the Greek Universities network (GUnet), whose aims include “the participation in developmental, educational and research programmes with regard to network technologies, services and applications aiming at the maintenance of the academic network at the peak of technology” (GUnet website). Apart from these first attempts to support distance education, it was the foundation of the Hellenic Open University in 1997 that established distance education in the Greek educational context (Lionarakis, 2008).

In some distance educational institutions, ‘Research Methodology is a fundamental module for the structured master’s degree in education’ (Schulze, 2009: 997), yet this is not the case at the Hellenic Open University. There are tools, presented below in detail, to assist students in their research. However, since research is required for the completion of the master’s degree under discussion in this article, it is the writer’s view that the inclusion of such a module in the HOU would be welcomed by students.

2.1. Available online tools

The students of the Hellenic Open University (HOU) are provided with various tools which make academic research easier and faster. Firstly, HOU offers online library services (www.lib.eap.gr), with numerous titles – physical and online- available for loan and interlibrary loan through the ILSaS collaboration scheme, which includes 26 academic libraries. Furthermore, through the Hellenic Academic Libraries Link, better known as HEAL-Link (https://www.heal-link-gr.proxy.eap.gr) as well as an ever-expanding list of affiliations with other universities, HOU students have the chance to access various publications, such as academic journals, as well as e-books and dissertations. Finally, a specific website (https://apothesis.eap.gr) has been established for students to be able to access, among other papers, other HOU students’ dissertations. All these tools offer opportunities for “anchored instruction” (Fried et al., 2005), making students more autonomous in their research. However, there have been instances of online links not working, or certain books not being available in multiple copies at the HOU library. Instances like these test the students’ trust in the library services and prevent them from using them.

The World Wide Web can assist students in conducting academic research in various ways. To begin with, there are numerous online journals nowadays which offer articles free of charge on practically every aspect of education. In this way, students can explore different perspectives and keep up with the latest developments in their field. Even search engines, such as Google, provide researchers with custom search tools, i.e. Google Scholar, which allows users to access a wide range of sources. In addition to that, the Hellenic Open University makes use of the World Wide Web by establishing an online Yahoo group for each module on a yearly basis. Needless to say, students make frequent use of social media platforms, such as Facebook, where they establish groups, thus connecting learners with the same research interests and needs. All these features create an online community of learning (Darabi et al., 2013), through which students and tutors can communicate, upload
and share useful links and files, with a view to opening a window to more materials and broadening the students’ research potential.

There is no doubt that the World Wide Web has opened new horizons to researchers. Compared to the traditional educational contexts of the past, the amount of sources and materials available nowadays is significantly larger and easier to access (Giossos, Mavroidis & Koutsouba, 2008). Yet, the luxury that is the Internet does not come without drawbacks. The volume of available information may sometimes overwhelm students, since they usually have limited time to conduct their research. On top of that, they have to look through, evaluate and assess the relativity of the sources they encounter, which is rather difficult and time-consuming, especially for students who are not computer-literate to a great extent. Last but not least, some of the online journals mentioned above require the users to pay for subscription in exchange for the articles, excluding the majority of researchers from accessing certain sources and cancelling one of the fundamental concepts on which the World Wide Web was created, that of free exchange of ideas.

2.2. The role of tutors

The role of tutors in distance education is not confined to academic counseling. Tutors provide ‘learning support about and through the on-line environment’ (Nunan, George, & McCausland, 2000: 91), fostering student independence, as well as the development of self-pacing and self-regulated learning skills (Bernard et al., 2014; Schmid et al., 2014, among others). What is more, the feedback with which tutors provide their students exerts significant influence on their learning progress (Peroukidou, 2017). As regards academic research, tutors play a key role in assisting the organization and the implementation of the students’ research.

To begin with, at the beginning of the academic year, tutors provide students with a list of relevant bibliography for each module. This helps students familiarize themselves with the course material and allows for further exploration of sources based on their individual needs and preferences. In addition, HOU tutors frequently use the Yahoo groups to share relevant resources with their students. An extra step that could be taken is for tutors to utilize these groups to organize team research involving more than one student, in line with socio-constructivist principles about learning (Schulze, 2009). In this way, students will develop collaboration skills and researching sources may become less daunting for them.

When it comes to dissertation writing, the tutor may assist the student in identifying or narrowing down the research field. This can be done in two steps; first, the tutor may –and usually does so – provide the student with a list of relevant bibliography, so that the latter is able to choose the area they wish to research. Once the student has looked into prior research on the field to ensure that their research will be original, the tutor may assist the student in forming or finalizing the research questions or hypothesis. This is a crucial step in the process, since it has long been established that using a hypothesis prevents a blind search and indiscriminate gathering of masses of data which may later prove irrelevant to the problem under study (Young & Schmid, 1966). Furthermore, while the student reviews the relevant literature, they may encounter certain difficulties, as mentioned above, for instance unavailable sources. The tutor can then facilitate the process by providing access to certain sources if possible, or providing the student with resources such as articles and books.
Last but not least, the moral support provided by the tutors should be stressed. The tutor may sometimes become the main supporter of a student in distance education, especially when the latter feels overwhelmed, either due to the materials and processes, or even due to pressing deadlines, all of which can be the cause of serious stress (Östlund, 2005). Studies have shown that when tutors take on the extra role of mentor to provide students with motivation and psychological support, the drop-out rate is kept at a minimum (Mason, 2003; Mills, 2003).

3. Writing a dissertation: the role of technology

It has already been established that technology plays a major role in academic research. It also holds the key to organizing the research and writing of a dissertation in the context of a post-graduate programme. As soon as the field of research has been refined and the research questions or hypotheses have been posed, the student enters a complex process involving the interaction with a great amount of literature including printed and online sources, outlining a sound research design and the use of various research tools in order to achieve the desired goal: to answer the research questions while making a contribution to their academic field.

The first step in the process of research design is determining which research tools to use. Depending on the kind of research and the expected outcomes, quantitative or qualitative data needs to be collected¹, although in the majority of cases a combination of both is the researcher’s choice, so that ‘the quantitative and qualitative components are mutually illuminating’ (Bryman, 2007: 8). For the collection of quantitative data, a questionnaire is a widely used research tool in order to collect large amounts of data (Dörnyei, 2003; Dörnyei & Csizér, 2012; Hatch & Lazaraton, 1991), usually selected due to being easy to construct and complete, as well as providing a functional way to analyze the results in a way which is both precise and convenient to illustrate. The abundance of online applications such as Google Forms, SurveyMonkey and Surveygismo to name but a few, makes it easier not only to construct a questionnaire, but also to distribute it to potential respondents through social media. What is more, such applications provide the researcher with the necessary tools to check the questionnaire for reliability and present the results using visual prompts which are automatically generated, saving invaluable time and effort.

A special note should be made at this point on the importance of piloting the questionnaire, should a student decide to use it for the data collection process. Although piloting is a crucial element in a good study design (De Vaus, 2013), the process is sometimes neglected, perhaps under the pressure of time, overlooking the problems which may arise due to this negligence. For instance, at the piloting phase the researcher is able to determine if certain items are not designed properly, resulting in unclear or unusable results. With the use of software packages, such as SPSS Statistics, access to which is offered to HOU students, the piloting of a questionnaire is a rather simple process, which, in retrospect, will save students from unnecessary frustration at a later stage in the writing of their dissertation.

Apart from that, technology can assist students during their dissertation phase in a number of other ways. It goes without saying that storing articles and books in the hard drive of a computer saves a lot of money and space compared to printing materials and storing them in folders. Note-keeping on a computer is also more efficient, as it keeps the notes organized

¹ According to Nunan (1992), quantitative data is concerned with the measurement and analysis of defined variables, whereas qualitative data compiles subjective knowledge, aiming at enriching the data.
as well as available through a simple search. This is very important for a student organizing their materials while writing a dissertation, simply because the amount of literature a student is called to interact with can be overwhelming. To the same end, using a bibliography and citation tool, such as EasyBib, BibMe or Citation Machine, will rid the researcher of the fear of plagiarism.

4. Conclusion

The present article describes the realities of conducting research in the context of a master’s degree at the Hellenic Open University. Although no form of organized research has been conducted on the subject, the article is a compilation of the writer’s experiences while she completed her dissertation at the HOU. Yet, a suggestion can be made at this point for relevant future research to be carried out. Surveying the modus operandi of post-graduate students in the final phase of their studies may facilitate future students in conducting academic research and completing their dissertations while dispelling their fear and anxiety. The article focuses on the available tools the students/researchers can use to organize their research, the role of technology in all the phases of the process and the importance of tutor support. Summing up the content of the article, some recommendations can be made which may prove to be useful for post-graduate students. First and foremost, it is vital that students utilize all the available online tools which will turn out to be of valuable assistance. Nowadays, there are online libraries to help students locate materials, tools to help them keep track of their bibliography, and applications to assist with the organization, creation, piloting and distribution of research tools. Furthermore, students are urged to connect to other researchers through online applications offered by the HOU as well as social media platforms, not only to exchange views and materials, but also to broaden the pool of perspective participants in their own study.

Last but certainly not least, the students should seek advice from their tutors. At the initial phase when the students try to define their field of research, the tutors’ assistance in refining the field and the research questions/ hypotheses is invaluable. Needless to say, students may turn to their tutors for assistance regarding various matters ranging from further reading material and academic writing skills to administrative issues and moral support. And it is exactly this kind of moral support that can make or break students in that final part of their studies, when they may feel bewildered and overpowered.

References


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A small-scale study on research issues by interviewing TESOL post-graduate students at the Hellenic Open University

Ifigenia KOFOU

Research is undoubtedly the cornerstone of assignments and dissertations in distance education as well as an integral part of distance education students’ learning and knowledge acquisition. However, limited research has been done on the whole process of completing an assignment and/or a dissertation in the Greek TESOL context. Apart from that, distance learning students face difficulties in organizing their research and using research tools, which contribute not only to the success of their work but also to their learning process. Thus, small-scale research (of assignments and dissertations) should revisit the central issue of method in research and distance learning. To this end, the present paper focuses on collecting data and examining the views of TESOL students attending the post-graduate program ‘The Teaching of English as a Foreign/International Language’ at HOU as regards the research done for their assignments and dissertations, with an emphasis on the latter. Being aware of the limitations an interview entails, a semi-structured interview was selected as the most convenient tool for this small-scale research. Its use has long been recognized as an important method of data collection, is common practice in survey research, and is considered attractive for several reasons: it is particularly useful for brief surveys; it is useful for gaining rapid responses to a structured questionnaire; the results can be ordered and interpreted (Cohen et al., 2007). For the present study, the interview included both close- and open-ended questions to collect quantitative and qualitative data respectively. The topic was pre-determined by the researcher and the set of questions followed a specific order addressed to the interviewees in order to ensure comparability, organization and analysis of data, and limit subjectivity and bias from the part of the interviewer (ibid). A convenient sample of 11 students, who either attended the ‘Assessment in English Language Learning’ module or did their dissertations with the researcher, was selected. The questions, apart from some demographic ones, seek answers to the types of research and dissertations done by the students under discussion, what the topics relate to, the ways literature was sought and studied, the knowledge acquired and the contributions made, the methodology followed, the role of the supervisor, any other experiences, expectations and suggestions on the level of research. The results reveal the great contribution of the dissertation booklet to students’ organizing their research, the significant role of the supervisor in helping students select the tools and methodology in general and organize their research, and the contribution of dissertations and relevant research to the acquisition of knowledge, professional development, self-regulated learning and autonomy.
Η έρευνα αποτελεί τον ακρογωνιαίο λίθο των γραπτών εργασιών και των διατριβών των φοιτητών στην εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση, αλλά και αναπόσπαστο τμήμα της μάθησης και της απόκτησης γνώσεων. Ωστόσο, έχουν γίνει περιορισμένες έρευνες για τη διαδικασία ολοκλήρωσης μιας εργασίας και/ή μιας διατριβής σχετικής με τη διδασκαλία των ξένων γλωσσών στην Ελλάδα. Δεδομένων των δυσκολιών που αντιμετωπίζουν οι φοιτητές της εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευσης στην οργάνωση της έρευνάς τους και στη χρήση ερευνητικών εργαλείων, θεωρείται επιβεβλημένη η έρευνα στη μεθοδολογία της έρευνας στην εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση. Για τον σκοπό αυτό, η παρούσα εργασία επικεντρώνεται στη συλλογή δεδομένων και στην εξέταση των απόψεων των φοιτητών που παρακολουθούν το μεταπτυχιακό πρόγραμμα «Η Διδασκαλία της Αγγλικής ως Ξένης/Διεθνούς Γλώσσας» στο Ελληνικό Ανοικτό Πανεπιστήμιο σχετικά με τις γραπτές εργασίες και διπλωματικές εργασίες τους. Γνωρίζοντας τους περιορισμούς που συνεπάγεται η συνέντευξη, επιλέχθηκε ως εργαλείο της έρευνας η ερλεφθήκε της έρευνας η ημι-δομημένη συνέντευξη ως η πιο κατάλληλη μέθοδος συλλογής δεδομένων για τον λόγο ότι είναι ιδιαίτερα χρήσιμη για σύντομες έρευνες και για γρήγορες απαντήσεις, και τα αποτελέσματα μπορούν εύκολα να ταξινομηθούν και να ερμηνευτούν (Cohen et al., 2007). Το δείγμα της έρευνας αποτέλεσαν έντεκα φοιτήτριες που παρακολούθησαν τη Θεματική Ενότητα «Αξιολόγηση στην Εκμάθηση της αγγλικής γλώσσας» και τα ερωτήματα σχετίζονταν με το είδος της έρευνας που διεξήγαγαν οι συγκεκριμένες φοιτήτριες, τη σχετική βιβλιογραφία, τη γνώση που αποκτήθηκε, τον ρόλο του επιβλέποντα καθηγητή και τις προσδοκίες και πιθανές προτάσεις των φοιτητριών για βελτίωση της όλης διαδικασίας. Τα αποτελέσματα αποκαλύπτουν τη συμβολή του οδηγού εκπόνησης διατριβών του συγκεκριμένου ΜΠΣ στην οργάνωση της έρευνας, τον σημαντικό ρόλο του επιβλέποντος στην επιλογή των κατάλληλων ερευνητικών εργαλείων, καθώς και την επίδρασή που έχει η εκπόνηση μιας διπλωματικής εργασίας στην απόκτηση γνώσης, την επαγγελματική ανάπτυξη και την αυτονομία των φοιτητών.

Key words: research methodology, written assignments, dissertations, interview, distance education

1. Introduction

The suggestions made in distance education research for removing the emphasis from distance education students and placing it to the course itself and students’ preparation for further study (Dominguez & Ridley, 1999) signify the key role of research in distance education as ‘a systematic attempt to provide answers to questions’ (Tuckman & Harper, 2012, p.3). In basic research, the researcher seeks general answers by identifying the problem, selecting the variables through literature review, constructing a hypothesis, creating a research design, collecting and analyzing the data, and drawing conclusions. It is applied research which tests and evaluates the application of the product of basic research, seeking concrete and specific answers (Tuckman & Harper, 2012). Educational research, in particular, provides us with information and tools that have been tested, so that the results could be trusted, and with a way to share our practices with others, so that teaching and learning could be improved (Morrell & Carroll, 2010).
2. Theoretical background

Research constitutes the backbone of dissertations and, in many cases, of written assignments at the Hellenic Open University, but it has not always been given adequate significance or included as a module in post-graduate programmes. In this vein, specific issues have to be examined, such as students’ guidance in doing research and writing an assignment and/or a dissertation, the parameter of isolation in Distance Education programs, the role of the tutor/supervisor and the significance of feedback. Given that in many under- and post graduate programmes no module of Research Methodology is included, the role of the supervisor is of utmost importance as regards the feeling of isolation the students may feel while conducting some type of research, and the guidance and the feedback they need to proceed.

Guidance concerns the type of research that is appropriate for the problem under discussion, i.e. quantitative research, which is linked to statistics, data analysis (Tukey, 1962) and generalizability, or qualitative research which is longer in time and requires more volume to present the findings (Morrell & Carroll, 2010), since samples are small and not necessarily representative of the broader population, the generalizability of the results is therefore questioned, and the findings may lack rigour and be biased (Patton & Cochran, 2002). As not everyone is educated in the application of the whole range of existing methodologies in practice, it should be the research question that is guiding the decision which method to use, according to the academic literature (Crotty, 1998). In the case of the post-graduate program ‘The Teaching of English as a Foreign/International Language’, students are guided to write their dissertation through the dissertation booklet (HOU, 2016) by being provided with a short overview of existing methods and guidelines on the steps to follow: select the research questions, plan the research, prepare the literature review, collect and analyze data, and present the findings.

Students in Distance Education programmes may have a feeling of isolation, which can affect their motivation and academic performance (Meacham & Evans, 1989; Wegerif, 1998), and contribute to a risk of abandoning their studies and dropping out of their programme (Peters, 1992). This is due to limited interaction with the tutor and/or their fellow students (Delahoussaye & Zemke, 2001; Egbert & Thomas, 2001; Hipp, 1997; Rogers, 1990), which is considered to be a necessary coefficient of successful learning (Moore, 1989).

Another significant parameter in Distance Education programmes is feedback (Howard, 1987) because of its influence in learning and progress (Race, 1999) and the development of writing skills (Walker, 2009). Feedback is used to alter the gap between actual and reference levels (Sadler, 1989), so tutors and supervisors are expected to help the students reduce that gap, reflect on their work in affective, cognitive, developmental, metacognitive, motivational and social perspectives, and provide the learners with opportunities to develop themselves toward their personal training goals. Feedback also opens and maintains a dialogue between tutors and students (Hyland & Hyland, 2001), an interaction necessary in the distance learning context, which communicates knowledge and facilitates learning (Kofou, 2019).

To this end, the role of the tutor/supervisor seems of great importance in interacting with the students, so as they do not feel isolated, guiding them throughout and providing them with constructive feedback. The supervisor’s role is essential in exchanging and discussing ideas and innovative and creative thoughts, advising on relevant areas of literature, guiding through the process, and providing detailed feedback for the final draft (HOU, 2016).
3. Interviewing post-graduate students about research

The aim of the present study is to shed light on the research type and research tools the students at the post-graduate programme of the Hellenic Open University ‘The Teaching of English as a Foreign/International Language’ use for their written assignments and dissertations, the resources they resort to, the organization of their methodology and the difficulties they face, the role of the supervisor, and suggestions on improvement of the whole process.

It is actually a small qualitative study employing the interview as a tool for data collection. According to Cohen et al. (2007), the interview is a flexible tool, a constructed situation, with a specific purpose, based on questions which seek to get explicit and as detailed as possible responses. Citing Kitwoot (1977), it is assumed that if the interviewer does his/her job well, i.e. establishes rapport and asks questions in an acceptable manner, and if the respondent is sincere and well-motivated, accurate data can be collected. For the present study semi-structured interviews were used with 10 closed mostly demographic questions, and 12 standardized open-ended questions (Patton, 1980), the same for all the respondents, and in the same order, thus increasing comparability of the responses, reducing bias, and facilitating organization and analysis of the data (Cohen et al., 2007). This combination helps on one hand to find regularities and attempt to make generalizations, and on the other to portray and catch uniqueness (Morrison, 1993).

3.1. The Research Sample

The research sample was eleven students out of about forty-three who had attended the ‘Assessment in English Language Learning’ module during the last three years and were positive to be interviewed. Most of them preferred to be sent all the questions, even the open ones, via e-mail so as to avoid appointments and have ample time to think and reply. The demographic questions included information about the students’ studies, the entry year in the Hellenic Open University, the modules attended and the marks received. According to the students’ replies, six of them had graduated from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and five from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. Two had also attended another postgraduate course, and specifically, in Educational Administration and Management (University of Thessaly, Department of Primary Education) and American literature (University of Essex). The entry year in the Hellenic Open University varied from 2005 to 2014, with six of them entering it in 2012. All of them had successfully attended the compulsory modules AGG52 Language Learning Skills and Materials - Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking and AGG53 Course design, implementation and evaluation in English language teaching. As for the elective ones, ten had attended AGG65 Assessment in English Language Learning, six of them AGG66 Educational Technology for ELT, and three either AGG67 Teaching English to Young Learners or AGG69 Teacher Education in ELT.

3.2. The Research Findings

As mentioned above, the questions were both closed and open, and an attempt was made to interpret the data by categorizing and ordering units of meaning included in the responses (Cohen et al., 2007). The specific students’ dissertations, and therefore the area of their research, were related to assessment modes, young learners’ strategic use, technology, and distance education. More specifically, four of the dissertations developed the Portfolio at different levels and for different skills in various contexts, one dealt with proficiency testing, one with project work as a form of alternative assessment, two with
feedback on written assignments and its effect both on the learning and teaching process, one with strategy instruction to young learners and one with Web 2.0 tools in Formative Assessment.

According to the students, the topics of written assignments and/or dissertations related to the knowledge acquired in the modules for all of them. For most of them (6-7), they also related to innovative practices or professional development, while almost one third (4 answers) was connected with the Curriculum or a teaching practice. There were also minor options for personal experience as a student of the HOU (2 options), knowledge acquired in undergraduate studies (1 option), and prior knowledge (1 option). Most students (5-6) preferred to do a teaching practice and a presentation of action research or of a case study. Fewer (2-3) selected a research proposal, a research report or a project.

As regards the type of research done for their written assignments and dissertations, most (5-6) preferred either qualitative research or quantitative research, a case study or action research. There were also two replies for applied research, and one for basic research. The majority (10 students) selected a questionnaire as a research tool. Other types of tools selected were observation (6 students), interviews and tests (4 students for each tool), rubrics or checklists (3 students) and data drawn from the University (2 students). It seems that students feel safer when they apply the knowledge they have acquired at the programme to practice by selecting a tool that can give quantitative data easily processed.

Writing an assignment and or a dissertation is a demanding procedure for post-graduate students, which takes them a lot of hours every week. Some believe that they needed five to ten hours of study per week, or 50-70 hours of study for each assignment, and many more for their dissertation. As one of the students said, ‘during school holidays, the study schedule (much tighter than the one suggested by tutors) was much easier both for the modules and the dissertation’.

The next questions regarded the difficulties faced with the research methodology or other difficulties while writing the assignments. Three of the replies related to time constraints and management, while two of them with the word limit. Four students found difficulty in the access to ‘some important academic journals’ or sources that “required subscription” or relevance of articles to the topic of the assignments. Other difficulties related to ‘applying the innovative practices learned in the modules in real time teaching’, never being taught how to write an assignment and keep notes and write a dissertation in detail, and also to the APA reference style. As one of the students reports, ‘My undergraduate studies hardly included any written assignments and neither did they include a final-year dissertation. I think the lack of such experience was obvious at the beginning’. For mothers with young children, the schedule was even tighter with family obligations apart from teaching and administrative duties.

The following question had to do with the sources used for written assignments and dissertations, which constituted a difficulty for some students, as mentioned above. All students used the papers uploaded by the tutor in a yahoo group or on the Moodle, and journals. A great number (7) used web portals, while fewer searched literature in university libraries (4), data bases (2), subscription services (1) and publishers (1). A student stated that the access to the HOU apothosis of the dissertations helped her a lot.

As for the knowledge acquired through the written assignments and dissertations (fig. 1), the vast majority of the participating students agreed that it was related to the use of
literature (10), application of theory to practice (10), academic diction and structure (9), and analysis and synthesis of the issues under examination (8). Some replies were also connected to the organization and unity of the papers (4), preparation for the exams (4), presentation skills (3), and metacognitive or self-assessment skills (2).

![Knowledge acquired through written assignments](image)

Figure 1: Knowledge through written assignments & dissertations

Most students believe that written assignments and dissertations contributed (fig. 2) more to autonomy (10), acquisition of knowledge (9) and self-regulated learning (9), and less to professional development (7), motivation (5) and change of attitude to distance education (4). Other factors that written assignments and dissertations contributed to were mainly sharing of knowledge (10) and communication with the tutor (8) rather than communication with peer students (4), improved environment in contact sessions (3), collaboration (2), or better understanding of the connection between theory and practice (2).

Actually, some believe that it was ‘a valuable experience with several benefits not only in terms of the knowledge gained, but also of the people met’. This is enforced by another student too, who found most tutors’ guidance really helpful: ‘Before embarking on this M.Ed. and although I had more than once participated in distance learning seminars, I thought that I would face difficulties in communicating with other students or the tutors. It turns out that communication was indeed trickier. … Yet, most tutors were particularly helpful and other students understood and faced similar issues. I have come to believe that the tutors’ availability for guidance and the fact that all assignments and the dissertation were relevant to my everyday teaching at school made up for the awkward communication and were enough for me to take charge and become the master of my own learning and professional development. This is my most distinct sense of this M.Ed. It helped me become a better, more informed and confident teacher and gain confidence in pursuing my professional development’.

Afterwards, the students were asked about the way they organized their methodology for their dissertation. It seems that the supervisor gives significant guidance not only in the organization of the research but also in the methodology and especially the research tools to be used.
Most students began their study by first reading articles, books, relevant dissertations and the dissertation booklet provided by the Hellenic Open University. This helps them to define the context of their research and design the research questions. The next step was to specify the methods, quantitative and qualitative, that they would use: ‘when I decided on my research questions I explored the various methodologies I could use to retrieve data, opting for the ones that would be more suitable for my limited sample and characteristics of my target group’. Actually ‘the methodology and the course of the research were organized before it began’. In most cases, the selection and design of the research tools (questionnaires, checklists, rating scales, etc.) were realized with the help of the supervisor, whose contribution is highly appraised by the interviewees: ‘I also discussed with my supervisor who offered advice and suggested that certain tools would better support my research’, ‘However, I would not have known what to do exactly if it hadn’t been for the instructions I received from my supervisor. She explained in details the steps I would have to follow’, or ‘With the specific teaching situation and the research questions in mind and with the help of my supervisor, the research tools were selected’. The implementation stage followed with collecting the data, describing the process, and processing and evaluating the findings, for instance: ‘After I had gathered my data, I tried to interpret the results in relation both to the theory and the research questions’. Time management was another parameter that students took into account. As some of them said, ‘For me the most important organizational issue had to do with time. It was very important to manage my time so that I could do all the reading and writing within the deadlines’, ‘I planned the framework of the research with specific dates in mind’, ‘I tried to read most of the bibliography during the summer and I produced the research tool quite early. Therefore, I had time to collect a large sample and to go through the statistical procedures that I needed to apply to get my results’. Through the tutor-student cooperation and frequent discussion, time can be successfully managed, so that students can complete the writing promptly, do the editing and reach valid conclusions. That means that in some cases, doing preparatory work or study before the official beginning of dissertations makes the whole process much easier. In a way, that is expressed by a student who ‘Contrary to common practice, she actually wrote a substantial part of the second chapter first (the part that related to the theoretical grounding of the questionnaire) so by Christmas she had the questionnaire and almost a whole chapter ready, which made the task of writing a dissertation appear less daunting’.

### Figure 2: What written assignments contribute to

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<td>Connection between</td>
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Among the main difficulties that students had to face while doing their dissertation were time, use of technology, Research Methodology and research tools, statistics and the APA reference style, in-text citations and the reference list. More specifically, time was a hindrance as ‘a dissertation requires more concentration and being able to find longer stretches of time to work compared to simpler assignments’, ‘limited time span was available for the realization of this study since the monitored course lasted for eight months’, and there were a lot of ‘family and work responsibilities’. Research tools were also a problem, either because some students had little prior knowledge or because they were ‘time consuming and since they were to be applied in class, I had to overcome problems in which other factors were also involved, for instance the limited time I had with the students, the absence of many of them, their parents’ complaints and a few more’. Another problem was related to statistics, which was overcome either with the supervisor’s help or with ‘instructional videos’ and ‘relevant guidebooks’. In some cases, dependence on technology constituted a problem for reasons such as Internet connection necessary for gathering the bibliography or technical difficulties for the implementation of the research ‘although most students had the necessary devices and Internet access at their disposal’. Other problems concerned ‘the limited number of participants, making it a small scale study not allowing enough room for generalization and safe conclusions for the rest of the student population’ and ‘the curriculum we were obliged to follow, given that the target group was an exam class, and therefore there was little chance for divergence from the language school’s plan’.

Given the above problems, it would be very helpful to the students if a module on research methods was included in the postgraduate programme.

We have already mentioned that the supervisor was of great help to the students as regards the methodology and the research tools. However, the supervisor’s assistance was not restricted to that as the participating students reply to the relevant question. In fact, the supervisor helped ‘by any possible means’. One of the areas of his/her contribution was the guidance and the right direction as regards the research, the tools and the material. For instance, ‘She provided useful advice, guidance and support’, ‘My supervisor helped me by pinpointing the right direction for my research and the tools that should be employed … and also provided me with some online sources’, ‘He offered guidance throughout the process, from the moment I chose the topic when he helped me to decide on the points to focus on, to the final corrections and organization of the chapters’, ‘She sent me materials to study…’, ‘She offered me guidance and information in order to find the research tools that I needed’, ‘At the beginning of the process, she provided me with a list of relevant material and sources I could explore in the first phase of my research, which was very helpful and assisted my phrasing the research questions’.

Another area was related to the regular contacts between the student and the supervisor, which seem to be necessary for the completion of the dissertation. What some students mention is: ‘Throughout the process, she also made sure we keep regular contact and was eager to discuss any queries I had. By insisting on keeping regular contact with us, she helped me to keep track of my progress and better organize my studies and the research. That also helped me to overcome the hesitation I had at first to contact her, being unsure as to the gravity of my questions’, ‘It was really helpful that I could contact her whenever I needed to’, ‘She was available on the phone any time I needed her and dedicated time to explain anything I asked for’, ‘She suggested frequent communication and she was at my disposal any time I needed to talk to her’, or ‘She contacted me regularly to check on my progress (although it should have been the other way round) and to remind me of deadlines’.


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Prompt feedback, which has been proved to be helpful in many ways (Kofou, 2019), was valuable to the students: ‘As for the feedback for each chapter and any part of the dissertation, she made targeted and precise comments without limiting my voice, which was of great value to me’, ‘... her feedback came very soon after I had submitted work’, ‘The feedback she sent me helped me refine my research and submit a final paper of better quality’, ‘The feedback she sent me after having read the chapters was very clear and helpful’.

Another kind of help provided by the supervisor was connected with affective factors, such as encouragement and support so that the students would keep writing and finish their dissertation on time. Some examples include the following: ‘She was always encouraging and was really enthusiastic and supportive from the very beginning’, ‘... she encouraged me when I did not think I would manage through’, ‘Throughout the completion of my dissertation, she was very supportive and provided me with the courage and determination I so desperately needed’, ‘She offered practical help by giving me detailed suggestions and solutions whenever I had any kind of difficulty and she was very encouraging and supportive particularly at the time I was thinking of quitting’, ‘She also gave me a very helpful schedule for submitting chapters from the start, so I knew what I was expected to do and when’, ‘If it hadn’t been for her, I would not have completed my dissertation this year’.

The next question asked the students to make an overall comment on their whole experience of doing their dissertation at the Hellenic Open University. The general aspect is that, albeit difficult, tiring and stressful the whole process is, it ends up to be a positive experience which provides students with a lot of confidence. Some indicative comments include: ‘It was more demanding than I expected…’, ‘It was difficult, thorough, and needed prior experience’, ‘At first the whole thing seemed too large and I was wondering what I could possibly write that would cover 15,000 words!’, ‘It was both a very tiring and stressful experience that I did not enjoy at all.’, ‘It was not an easy journey, but it was a useful one’, ‘I enjoyed the whole experience…’, ‘It was a positive experience, through which I learned a lot’, ‘Now I can say that the whole project took a lot of time and effort, but it was well worth it!’, ‘It is a challenge; a race against yourself and your own limits. It is stressful, exhausting at times and very rewarding in the end’, ‘Only at the very end did I realize its value’.

The stress the students felt came mostly from inexperience and lack of organizational skills: ‘To be honest, though, if I had been more disciplined and better organized I could have diminished all the issues concerning time and stress’, ‘The greatest achievement and gain was that I managed to come up with an idea, organize and apply it, retrieve data and draw conclusions and all these under certain conditions, facing certain difficulties and meeting deadlines’, ‘Then I forgot about the writing part and focused on reading and note-taking for a couple of months. So I realized that there were actually so many angles to look from and so many issues to cover that I needn’t worry so much. When I produced the questionnaire and got the approval of the supervisor I relaxed and started enjoying the research process’, ‘You need good organization skills, a quick eye to spot and evaluate the endless material you have to deal with, and good academic writing skills’.

Despite the stress on how to start and proceed with the dissertation, after the successful completion of it, students feel confident in many ways. First, they are equipped with academic experience: ‘it would be unfair not to say that the four modules that preceded had equipped me with certain academic experience’, ‘I realized that the reason I managed to succeed in completing it, was that the modules had prepared me for this process in terms of knowledge and time management’, ‘... and expanded my theoretical knowledge as well’, ‘As
for assessment, which is my dissertation topic, I think I have made an in-depth study for an issue that I am really interested in’.

Second, they have improved as teachers: ‘...it enabled me to apply innovative practices and improve my teaching’, ‘... it was an empowering process that practically helped me to improve myself as a teacher’, ‘I learnt a lot of things as far as my teaching is concerned and I did try to improve my weaknesses as a teacher which led to an increased teaching effectiveness’.

Third, they can organize and apply a research in their context: ‘I can organize a research which will be useful in my profession...’.

Fourth, they feel confident enough to write a paper: ‘I now feel quite confident to write an academic paper’; ‘It is certainly a process that empowers you for future academic endeavors, such as publishing a paper in a journal’.

It should be mentioned again that the dissertation booklet, although it gives some guidance to the students, does not compensate for all the difficulties that they might face. Therefore, a module on research methods, which would supply the students with both theoretical and practical knowledge, would be of great value to them.

As regards the fulfillment of students’ expectations, either high or low, the replies are positive. Basically, their expectations considered application of theory to practice and doing research, such as becoming ‘more competent as to alternative assessment techniques’, ‘managing to make research useful for the student who participated’, or the ‘students successfully completing the A1/A2 exam’. One of the students said that the research ‘helped me gain confidence regarding the practice of alternative assessment techniques with whole classes and for a considerable period of time. I believe that it developed slightly better than I had expected despite practical difficulties’. Another one stated that despite the workload and parallel obligations along with the dissertation, ‘I was really enthusiastic about my topic and I had a lot of trust in my idea so I knew, as it actually happened, that my expectations would be fulfilled’. Their considerations involved ‘the learners’ benefit on a linguistic level’, ‘to collect a large sample and to get results that would actually contribute to relative research’, ‘to contribute to the field’, ‘to carry out a research in a real classroom, which would give credible results’, or ‘answering my research questions’.

Another consideration was surprisingly related to reliability and validity of the research, which was expressed in various ways: ‘I was eager to research the validity and reliability of project-based assessment’, ‘I think that these expectations were to a large extent fulfilled since I got a very high reliability index’, ‘if I had anticipated these answers better, maybe I could have organized my methodology better (e.g. by adding interviews) to complete my research without grey points’. This consideration enforces the necessity of teaching students some basic principles of Research Methodology and statistical analysis.

This necessity is also suggested by the interviewed students when asked to make suggestions on improving the process of doing research for a dissertation: ‘I think that perhaps some instruction on basic statistics for those interested, as well as other research methods would be very helpful’, ‘Students need to be taught or guided thoroughly in order to do a research especially when dealing with the format of it’, ‘Another suggestion would be to train students to use applications that aid bibliography writing, because it’s a messy aspect of research and takes up a lot of the students’ precious time’, ‘... especially when we refer to
human sciences there should be more qualitative data retrieved through observations and interviews. Although the use of questionnaires is very common, widely used and easier to process, the findings sometimes fail to reflect certain aspects of a person’s learning or attitude for example’.

Another suggestion made concerns the resources the students could use for their dissertation. For instance, ‘Doing research involves searching for materials, and the Internet is usually a great tool for that. There are some useful tools provided by the HOU (such as the HEALink), but to my knowledge not many students use them. On the other hand, a lot of the resources found on the Web are available only in exchange for money. To that end, I think the HOU could establish links with more academic journals, so that students can access more resources for free’, or ‘Easier access to university libraries and more papers uploaded by the tutors’.

Other suggestions regarding the university relate to an earlier beginning of dissertations when research in class is demanded and a closer collaboration and exchange of knowledge between students who work on a specific topic. The following quotes make the point clearer: ‘The only thing I would like to note is that it would be useful if the whole process started earlier than it does, or at least than it did for the current school year. I guess this is not important for all kinds of dissertations but it is important when research in class is required’, ‘If time is running out, you naturally become more stressed and your research options are narrowed. Both can cause serious problems to the whole process. ... My motto was “This will actually take more time than you think”, and it was always the case at every stage of the dissertation!’, ‘... if there were one thing I could suggest is peer-work, that is, a group of researchers/HOU students working together on the same topic in order for the results to be more reliable’.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of the present study, albeit small in scale, are indicative of the difficulties Distance Education students might encounter while working on their dissertation, such as time management, resources and organisation of their research. Despite the difficulties, the whole process of conducting research and writing the dissertation renders students more autonomous and self-regulated, and helps them apply literature to practice, use academic diction and structure, and acquire knowledge. It is also evident that the role of the supervisor in guiding and encouraging students so as not to feel isolated or bewildered (Crotty, 1998) and providing them with constructive feedback, and the aid the students get from the HOU dissertation booklet are valuable in finishing their dissertation on time. What is expected is the inclusion of tutorials or a module on Research Methodology and Statistical Analysis, which would be of great help to students doing their dissertation and make them feel more confident about the type of method and tools to employ.

What actually emerges from the present study is the absence of a Research Methodology module in the specific post-graduate programme which would equip the students with all the necessary theoretical and practical knowledge of designing their research and subsequently save precious time. If students are informed of the existing methods, they can easily select the appropriate method for their research and they will be able to design their tools or use some existing ones. Some teaching of Statistics will further help them process the data and test the reliability and validity of the research tools. Availability of web material and instructions on how to search and report bibliography will further facilitate the whole process.
That means that the role of the supervisors will be restricted to their field and the guidance, feedback, support and encouragement students need to go on with their research and complete their dissertation on time rather than to the presentation of any possible research methods.

References


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Written assignments are crucial components of the majority of postgraduate distance courses and programmes bridging the distance between instructors and students and involving them in a constant dialogue. Assignments promote learning helping students to process the content and to make connections between what they already know and the new material. They also reflect students' progress and help the instructor evaluate their strengths and weaknesses in order for him/her consider (further) remedial action. Given their importance for learning, this section focuses on the extent to which HOU written assignments are linked to the actual classroom. In other words, it focuses on this theory-practice interrelationship, which is a prominent issue in the field of teacher education and development. The papers investigate the extent to which the HOU assignments help teachers to be effective in their role.

Ms. Kataropoulou’s paper presents the research of a study which focused on the teaching practices of students at the HOU M.Ed. in TEF/IL and investigates the extent to
which the written assignments affect these practices. In fact it sees the HOU written assignments as opportunities for teacher development and examines the degree to which the reflective nature of the course along with the assignments can inform or transform the classroom reality of the student teachers in terms of their methodological choices and their attitudes towards teaching and learning.

The paper by Glava and Stavraki, reports on the findings of a small-scale research, which explored the attitudes of foreign language teachers participating as M.Ed. students in the same programme. In fact, the research focused on their beliefs about the written assignments of the compulsory modules of the M.Ed. in TEF/IL course, namely, the ‘Language Learning Skills and Materials – Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking’ and the ‘Course design, Implementation, and Evaluation in English Language Teaching’. The research also intended to discover participants’ perceptions concerning the impact of the aforementioned assignments on the way they implement the Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum (IFLC), the official curriculum adopted at schools in Greece.

Maria Stathopoulou
The impact of HOU written assignments on student teachers’ practices within the IFLC framework: exploring attitudes and beliefs

Maria GLAVA & Christina STAVRAKI

This paper reports on the findings of a small-scale research which, based on a mixed methods approach, consisted of a qualitative and a quantitative phase and had a twofold aim. First, it intended to explore the attitudes of M.Ed. students/graduates who participated in the programme with the title “The Teaching of English as a Foreign/International Language” (TEF/IL) of the Hellenic Open University (HOU). The research actually focused on their beliefs about the written assignments of the compulsory modules of the M.Ed. in TEF/IL course, namely, the ‘Language Learning Skills and Materials – Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking’ (AGG52) and the ‘Course design, implementation, and evaluation in English language teaching’ (AGG53). Another aim of the paper was to discover participants’ perceptions concerning the impact of the aforementioned assignments on the way they implement the Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum (IFLC), the official curriculum of the public schools. The research results suggested that while the AGG52 module assignments seem to assist the participants in combining theory with practice by promoting reflection and help them to challenge their teaching practices within the IFLC framework, the AGG53 module assignments did not meet the students/graduates’ expectations regarding the applicability of the studied theory in their teaching context.

Key words: HOU assignments, IFLC, theory-practice integration, Mixed Methods Research

1. Introduction

The advancement of electronic communication media during the last two decades has had a major impact on the way teaching and learning take place in higher education settings facilitating the partial or entire computer-mediated delivery of educational courses, frequently referred to as ‘distance education’ (Ascough, 2002; Moore et al., 2011). The latter is usually defined as the planned synchronous or asynchronous learning that calls for special techniques of course design as well as organizational and administrative arrangements and encompasses a wide range of technologies for its successful realization (Koohang & Durante, 2003; Moore et al., 2011; Simonson et al., 2014).
The Hellenic Open University (HOU) is the only university in Greece to the present day which specializes in the area of distance education and offers exclusively distance online courses (Lionarakis, 1996; Papaefthymiou-Lytra & Sifakis, 2011). In line with other Open Universities, such as The Open University in the UK (www.openuniversity.edu) and the Open University of Cyprus (www.ouc.ac.cy), written assignments have a central role to play in the HOU M.Ed. programme. Their purpose is twofold: on the one hand they foster the development of the students’ academic writing skills and on the other hand they require the student teachers of English to critically reflect on their teaching situation so as to link theory with actual teaching practice (Papaefthymiou-Lytra & Sifakis, 2011).

This paper reports on the findings of a small scale research which aims to explore the attitudes of M.Ed. students/graduates who are also state school EFL teachers towards the integration of theory with practice in the written assignments of the compulsory modules of the HOU M.Ed. with the title “The Teaching of English as a Foreign/International Language” (TEF/IL) and explore their opinions as to whether the assignments have an impact on the way they implement the Integrated Foreign Language Curriculum (IFLC). In doing so, it first provides a brief description of the assignments included in the modules under discussion and, then, proceeds to the theoretical foundations of the research emphasizing the role of reflection as a catalyst for merging theory with practice and as a tool for professional development. Finally, it delineates the research procedure and moves on to the analysis of the results. The paper concludes with a discussion on the implications of the results with respect to the content of the written assignments.

2. The HOU compulsory modules: content and assignments

The duration of the TEF/IL postgraduate course ranges from three to five years depending on the students’ time constraints and personal preferences. It is structured around the successful completion of four modules, two compulsory and two elective ones, and a dissertation. It is a requisite that students complete the two compulsory modules, namely, the ‘Language Learning Skills and Materials – Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking’ (AGG52) and the ‘Course design, implementation, and evaluation in English language teaching’ (AGG53) modules, either in their first year of study or in the first couple of years before choosing among the six elective modules, which can likewise be attended separately or together. In each module students are required to submit four Tutor-Marked Assignments graded on a ten-point scale and sit for a final examination. Moreover, according to the HOU regulation, the students can only participate in the final examination if they have acquired an overall passing grade regarding the assignments. HOU students are provided with set books, printed and video course materials especially designed for distance learning and are encouraged to participate in five Contact Sessions coordinated by the course Tutor.¹

Specifically, the AGG52 module aims to introduce M.Ed. students to basic concepts of teaching and learning English as a foreign language and familiarize them with the theoretical underpinnings of the teaching of the four language skills with a view to preparing them to apply the acquired knowledge into the design, implementation and evaluation of original lessons. The students are expected to get acquainted with the processes involved in language reception and production, to be able to reflect on their teaching practice, to evaluate and adapt their teaching methods and materials on the basis of their learners’ profile and, most importantly, to integrate the theory presented in the module into practice. Directing students’ attention to communicative and reflective language teaching (Sifakis,

¹ For more information please visit https://www.eap.gr.
2004) as regards the teaching of the four skills is considered to be a key aspect of this module.

The AGG53 module aims at familiarizing students with the principles of curriculum and syllabus development and course design by providing insights into curriculum development concepts and elaborating on the underlying principles of curriculum development models with an emphasis on communicative curricula and process syllabi. In brief, it can be argued that the AGG53 module is oriented towards providing M.Ed. students with the necessary theoretical knowledge and skills to critically reflect on existing curricula and syllabi and assume the role of innovator in their everyday teaching practice (Ayakli et al., 2004).

3. Theory, practice, reflection through the HOU written assignments

Despite the differences in their structure and their requirements, the written assignments of the AGG52 and AGG53 modules share considerable common ground: they both aim at linking the theory presented in the study materials of the module with the student teachers’ classroom practice. The catalyst for such an integration is reflection (Korthagen, 2011). The notions of theory, practice and reflection are discussed in this section.

3.1. Theory and practice: dichotomy and convergence

The relationship between theory and practice has been an issue of perennial concern in the field of teacher education. Early perceptions of theory and practice as two distinct endeavours, reflected on the Craft and the Applied Science models, have been criticized by researchers as creating an inoperative atmosphere for teachers and unreasonable dysfunctions in the teaching process (Clarke, 1994; Korthagen & Kessels, 1999). Recent trends in teacher education, however, regard theory and practice as complementary to each other (Bruner, 1986, 1990; Clarke, 1994; Kessels & Korthagen, 1996; Korthagen & Kessels, 1999; Korthagen, 2010, 2011) and acknowledge the contribution of the Reflective Model (Wallace, 1991) which introduces a dialectic relationship between scientific and experiential knowledge realised through reflection (Orland-Barak & Yinon, 2007). Within this framework, research suggests breaking down the theory-practice barriers by pointing out that theory should be applied to practice while practice can serve as feedback for further theory development.

Researchers such as Kessels and Korthagen (1996), drawing upon the Aristotelian concepts of ‘episteme’ and ‘phronesis’ as the two facets of theory, forward the discussion on the integration of theory into practice by proposing an expanded concept of theory so that it includes practice as well. According to them, episteme, or theory with a big T, is defined as the general, coherent, objective, conceptual knowledge based on scientific research, and phronesis, or theory with a small t, as the subjective, perceptual, situation-specific...

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2 The Craft Model, represents the situation-specific knowledge that a trainee acquires by observing or working closely with an expert teacher (Gyftopoulou, 2010; Wallace, 1991). This model of teaching practice falls short of incorporating theory, which is considered generalized and deficient to help practitioners grapple with the idiosyncratic variables that each teaching situation bears (Gibbons, 2006; ibid) and fails to account for innovation and scientific advancements in the teaching profession (Beaumont, 2005; Day, 1993). The Applied Science Model (Wallace, 1991), on the other hand, involves experts and training institutions conveying scientific knowledge to prospective and in-service teachers. This model was criticized for placing too much emphasis on theory, underestimating the experiential knowledge and thus creating a dichotomy between research and practice (Gyftopoulou, 2010; ibid).
knowledge which is decisive in figuring out a course of action in a certain situation (Kessels & Korthagen, 1996). In this regard, using epistemic knowledge could be the basis for planning a course of action for a specific case with the help of the perceptual features of phronesis. Put differently, theory is what lies behind what teachers consider to be practical (Korthagen & Kessels, 1999; Schratz & Walker, 1995).

Following this line of thinking, it can be argued that the written assignments of the TEF/IL programme focus on this theory-practice interrelationship by requiring the student teachers to apply the studied theory into practice through reflection. The latter is often described as an ongoing process underlying various stages of the teaching practice. As defined by researchers, it is a bipartite process involving the systematic analysis of “the practitioner’s professional practice and actions” (Attard, 2017, p. 3) by adopting a critical stance towards their teaching practice (Attard, 2017) on the one hand, and, the testing of hypotheses with a view to changing our perspectives and reframing problems on the other (Roberts, 2016). Thus, reflection, which is considered particularly useful to experienced teachers (ibid), is viewed as a strategy for professional growth (Korthagen, 2011), [fostering] teacher autonomy and self-determination” (Roberts, 2016, p. 49).

### 3.2. Written HOU assignments: integrating theory into practice?

Hinging upon the points raised above as well as the overview of the AGG52 and AGG53 written assignments, it could be argued that the latter roughly follow the spiral structure of the ALACT model (Korthagen, 2011) which was developed on the basis of reflective teaching within the framework of the realistic approach to teacher education, namely, Action, Looking back on the action, Awareness of essential aspects, Creating alternative methods of action and Trial. Specifically speaking, the assignments of the AGG52 module consist of two parts: in the first part, students are asked to critically describe their own teaching situation as regards the teaching of receptive and productive skills. In doing so, they engage in reflection, as a tool to "[question] taken-for-granted assumptions” (Loughran, 2002, p. 33), which often operate at an unconscious or semi-conscious level, which Korthagen (1999, 2011) terms a gestalt level, through the lens of new theoretical approaches. The second part entails the design and implementation of an original lesson based on a set of criteria that arise from the studied theory. In this way, teacher students have the opportunity to combine the theoretical knowledge they have acquired with the actual teaching practice and assess its practicality and efficiency.

In a similar vein, and despite the fact that the structure of the written assignments of the AGG53 module is quite different from that of the AGG52 one in that it follows a spiral pattern with each assignment building upon one another, reflection is said to be a key aspect of the AGG53 assignments as well. Teacher students are encouraged to review their teaching methodology with a critical eye in order to identify factors that affect the successful implementation of their syllabus. In other words, they are invited to draw upon their own teaching contexts, reflect upon their hidden assumptions about teaching through self-observation, and reframe them in the light of the theory presented to them in the module (Attard, 2012, 2017).

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3 Schön (1987) distinguishes between reflection on action which takes place after the event and reflection in action pertaining to changes in the teaching routine in order to resolve problems as they arise or respond to opportunities as they emerge. In a similar vein, Loughran (1996) distinguishes between the anticipatory, retrospective, and contemporaneous reflection stressing the importance of adopting different perspectives so that the teachers can enhance their understanding of their practice setting (Brouwer and Korthagen, 2005; Loughran, 2002).
4. HOU written assignments and the IFLC

The Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum (IFLC) was developed as a component of a multi-fold reform education program under the title ‘The Student first – The New School’ (2010) and has been the official curriculum for the foreign languages taught at state Primary and Junior High schools since September 2016 (FEK 2871/09-09-2016). Although it shares much common ground with the previous curriculum in terms of the notions of literacy, communication, multilingualism and multiculturalism, it is the first time that all foreign languages offered at Greek state primary and secondary education are considered equal having common aims and unified structure (Dendrinos & Gotsoulia, 2014; IEP, 2011). Secondly, there is a close correlation between the IFLC and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001; 2018) as the IFLC adopts the descriptors of the six-level scale of language performance suggested by the CEFR in order to define the level of language ability that students of each level are expected to demonstrate without specifying, though, the methods and the means to achieve it (Dendrinos & Karava, 2011). In other words, the IFLC determines the content of the courses, in correspondence with the CEFR levels, but does not specify the distribution of content and time, the materials or the methodology, since these are variables which are contingent on the specific teaching/learning context (Dendrinos & Gotsoulia, 2014; IEP, 2011). Taking these into account, it can be argued that the IFLC has signposted a shift to a more learner-centered curriculum framework.

Being a ‘data-driven curriculum’ (Dendrinos & Karava, 2013, p. 15) the IFLC (IEP, 2011) is based on the same principles as the written assignments of the compulsory modules of the TEF/IL M.Ed. programme as regards the integration of academic theory with practical knowledge. Furthermore, calling for well-trained teachers to implement the new curriculum (Dendrinos & Karava, 2013), it provides a direct link to the aims of the modules and their expected outcomes. What should also be pointed out is that the M.Ed student teachers who work at the state primary and secondary education are required to study the content of the IFLC (IEP, 2011) as part of their preparation for the written assignments. In the AGG52 assignments, in particular, student teachers demonstrate their working knowledge of the new curriculum both in the reflection section of the assignments, and in the lesson development one. In the first case, the IFLC holds a central place in the description of their teaching contexts, while, in the second one, the leveled descriptors of communicative competence recorded in the curriculum are exploited for the creation of lessons appropriate for the particular language ability level of the target group of learners. Speaking of the AGG53 assignments, on the other hand, it could be argued that the features of the IFLC are studied with reference to the curriculum, syllabus and materials development. In other words, the IFLC is examined in relation to the language learning theory that underlies its philosophy towards the end of designing syllabi and producing instructional materials that would be consistent with its theoretical orientation.

5. The research: design and implementation

5.1. Aim and research questions

The small scale research conducted for the purposes of this paper intends to explore the attitudes of the TEF/IL M.Ed. students/graduates who work in the public sector in relation to the reflective aspect of the written assignments and its correlation with the IFLC (IEP, 2011). Hence, three main research questions were formulated, as follows:
• Do TEF/IL M.Ed. students/graduates believe that the assignments echo the theoretical knowledge presented in the study material of the modules?
• What impact do they believe that the assignments have on their teaching practice?
• Do TEF/IL M.Ed. students/graduates believe that the assignments could assist them in reflecting and applying their newly acquired knowledge within the IFLC (IEP, 2011) framework?

5.2. Research Methodology: phases, participants and instruments

For an in-depth exploration of the research questions, it was agreed that the research should hinge on the synergistic methodological framework of the Mixed Methods Research (MMR) (Riazi & Candlin, 2014) adopting, in particular, the pragmatic perspective which focuses on practicality and emphasizes the “centrality of the research questions” (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 73). Specifically, the research was conducted in two consecutive phases; the first phase involved qualitative data collection through interviews addressing a limited number of subjects that is, six in-course and graduate students of the TEF/IL M.Ed. programme who were contacted over the telephone. The next step involved quantitative data collection gathered from a wider population sample using specially designed questionnaires. It follows that the research design used nested samples—the subjects who took part in the qualitative phase formed a subset of the participants in the quantitative phase (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007).

The profile of the respondents to the questionnaire appeared to be consistent with that of previous research pertinent to the M.Ed. in TEF/IL course (see Kataropoulou, 2017; also Paraeftymiou-Lytra & Sifakis, 2011). Thus, most respondents were female (96.8%) and their age ranged between 31 and 40 years (48.4%) although it should be pointed out that the 41 – 50 age group held a significant percentage (38.7%). Furthermore, most of the teachers that participated in the research were secondary school teachers (64.5%) and they had a teaching experience of 11 – 15 years (41.9%). Finally, the majority of the respondents were, at the time, studying towards the completion of their Master’s degree (77.4%) while M.Ed. graduates were insufficiently represented in the research (22.6%) (see Appendix III).

The interviews of the qualitative phase were conducted in the Greek language in keeping with the researchers’ assumption that using one’s mother tongue could create a less apprehensive atmosphere for the interviewees so that the latter could operate more functionally. It was also felt that the subjects would be able to articulate their thoughts and attitudes in a more spontaneous manner if their native language was used. The interviews were recorded and listened to in detail by both researchers. Although the interviews were not transcribed verbatim, notes were taken for each interview separately and the key points made by the interviewees were given the appropriate consideration since the qualitative outcomes of this phase formed the basis for the development of the quantitative part of the study as further explained below.

The analysis of the data collected from the interviews led to the development of a structured questionnaire which mainly consisted of “closed questions with pre-coded answers” (Mathers et al., 2007, p. 20) and aimed to “refine and extend the qualitative findings” (Creswell, 2012, p. 544) of the first phase of the research so that an in-depth understanding of the issues raised in the research questions was achieved. The questionnaire, created using the Google forms application so that its administration to the target population was facilitated, ensured the anonymity of the participants while its varied structure aimed to render it “more engaging for the [respondents]” (Bradburn et al., 2004, p.
61). More specifically, the question format included single and multiple responses questions, yes/no questions, and Likert-type scale ones. Besides the first few items eliciting biographical information (see Appendix II), sixteen questions were formulated under two broad categories on the basis of the themes identified in the interviews: the first category included questions pertaining to the integration of academic theory with the teaching practice (ibid, Questions 1 – 8) and the second one contained questions exploring the interrelation between the AGG52 and AGG53 written assignments and the IFLC (IEP, 2011) (see Appendix II, Questions 9 – 16).

On the whole, the structured interviews and the questionnaire created for the qualitative and quantitative phases of the research respectively followed the exploratory sequential design in which the second, quantitative phase, was developed on the basis of the results of the qualitative phase (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009) and was meant to test its “qualitative explorations” (Creswell, 2012, p. 548). In other words, rather than merely combining qualitative and quantitative designs, the findings of the qualitative phase were used in a twofold manner: they served, on the one hand, as the basis for the construction of the questionnaire of the second phase of the research, and, on the other hand, as the point of reference for the measurement of the degree of convergence with the results of the quantitative phase. In sum, the research design might be schematically represented as follows:

![Figure 1 (adapted from Creswell, 2012)](image)

6. Research findings: presentation and discussion

6.1. Qualitative phase

The findings obtained through the analysis of the interviewees’ responses provided interesting results (see Appendix I). First, regarding the integration of theory into practice, it seems that the participants agree that the assignments have been conducive to theory consolidation –two of them also referred to internalization of knowledge- since the assignments require the student teachers to associate the presented theory with their particular teaching situations, reflect on and challenge them. Some of the participants (see for instance Extracts 1 and 2 below) suggested that the successful completion of the assignments would be unattainable but for the in-depth theory comprehension while there was also one mention that putting theory into practice was, however, the most onerous part of the assignments.

Extract 1: Studying [theory] for the assignments made me feel more confident about what I was doing in the classroom. They (i.e. the assignments) helped me understand how theory can be implemented into practice. (Sophia)

Extract 2: [The assignments] helped me internalize the theory I was studying. But for them, I would have forgotten what I had studied. (Maria)
The findings regarding the exploration of student teachers’ attitudes towards the assignments of each module separately reveal convergent views. In reference to the assignments of the AGG52 module, all participants shared the opinion that the theoretical principles exploited in them were applicable in their classroom practice to a great extent since they were practical and constructive, and echoed the greatest part of the received theory. Similarly, they all agreed that working on the assignments was supportive to their critically reflecting on their teaching practice so far - one of them reported that reflection has always been a part of it - and had a positive impact on the way they teach. Four participants mentioned that there has been a new orientation in the way they approach and teach the four skills, in the way materials are chosen or modified - the notion of authenticity in particular was brought up by two of them - and that they felt more confident in the design and implementation of their lessons.

Extract 3: While I was studying about the four skills I found very useful material that helped me in the implementation of the IFLC, especially concerning the choice of authentic materials to use in my classes. My teaching used to be textbook-oriented but I no longer hesitate to adapt or use authentic sources. There has been a shift in my teaching towards a more open consideration. (Magdalene)

There are converging opinions concerning the AGG53 module as well. However, in contrast to the student teachers’ positive disposition about the usefulness of the AGG52 assignments, it is claimed that the theoretical background and the assignments of the AGG53 module fell short of catering for the specific demands of their teaching practice. It should be mentioned that the participants criticized the content of the module as a whole but they did not provide specific comments on the assignments. Most responses included remarks such as ‘too theoretical’ or ‘I was lost in theory’, ‘vague’, ‘loaded with useless information’, ‘not easily applicable to my classroom practice’, ‘providing encyclopaedic knowledge’ or even ‘weird’. Half of the interviewees stated that not all four assignments were linked to the theory presented in the module while the majority (five out of six) regarded Needs Analysis as the most functional part of the module. Finally, one participant suggested that emphasis should be placed on certain issues such as practicality, whereas other theoretical issues could have been omitted.

The findings regarding the association between the assignments of the compulsory modules and the IFLC (IEP, 2011) framework suggest that even though all interviewees asserted the positive impact that the assignments had on their teaching practice, it appears that not all of them conceptualize the interrelationship between their teaching practice and the IFLC. Being asked about the degree to which they are acquainted with the new curriculum principles, half of the participants reported that they were fully aware of them while the rest replied that they lacked thorough knowledge of all of its aspects. Three participants noted that they delved into the IFLC for the requirements of the AGG53 assignments, two did so for the requirements of the AGG52 assignments and one for the assignments of both modules. Yet all interviewees claimed that dealing with the assignments had an overall positive impact on their teaching practice within the IFLC framework.

In agreement with their overall attitudes towards the AGG53 module, half of the interviewees insisted on referring to the inapplicability of certain theoretical principles of this module. In addition, two participants underlined the fact that although the issues dealt with in both modules seemed pertinent to their teaching practice, they could not be fully explored and applied due to the limitations of the Greek educational system. Two
participants were of the opinion that one needs to adapt and modify the received knowledge in accordance with their teaching context although this might involve a greater effort on the part of the teacher. Last, one interviewee acknowledged reflection and personal change as a requisite for the application of the received knowledge into practice.

6.2. Quantitative phase

The structured questionnaires of the second phase of the research provided deeper insight in the research questions explored in the qualitative phase. First of all, the majority of the responses indicate that the M.Ed. students/graduates agreed that the AGG52 and AGG53 written assignments foster the consolidation and internalization of the theory presented in the modules and promote reflection (48.4% and 41.9% of the respondents chose the 75% and 100% option respectively). Furthermore, although 77.4% of the subjects stated that reflection was part of their teaching practice before they started studying at the HOU, a great proportion of them (48.3%) recognizes the fact that the written assignments prompted them to practise reflection in a more systematic way (see Appendix III).

The question on the effect that the written assignments have on the teaching practice of the M.Ed. student/graduate teachers elicited a unanimous positive response (100%), although opinions on the factors that were affected the most varied. The most popular options in this regard were the teaching methodology (45.2%), the instructional sequences (22.6%) and the mode of work in the classroom (16.1%) (see Figure 2 below). In addition, 25.8% of the subjects identified a number of concepts presented in the modules that they had found hard to apply in their teaching practice. These included group-work, the multiple intelligences and learning styles theory, motivation and the development of a learner-centred syllabus.

![Figure 2: Aspects of teaching affected positively by the HOU written assignments](image)

The final section of the questionnaire focuses on the written assignments in relation to the IFLC (IEP, 2011). The first question which inquired whether the respondents studied the content of the national curriculum in preparation for the AGG52 and AGG53 written assignments (Question 1, Appendix III) triggered ambiguous results. It was unclear whether the 25.8% of them who answered negatively, submitted their assignments prior to the implementation of the IFLC (IEP, 2011) in state schools in September 2016. However, those who did study the content of the IFLC for their assignments stressed the usefulness of the theoretical knowledge they acquired. They seem to have implemented the IFLC more effectively into (see Appendix III; also, see Figure 3 below).
Did the theoretical knowledge that you acquired while studying for the AGG52 and AGG53 written assignments...

Figure 3: The written assignments as a facilitating factor for the implementation of IFLC

As regards the questions on the theoretical aspects presented in the study material of the AGG52 module and to what extent they affect teachers’ practice, the most frequent answers referred to the contextualization of tasks (71%), learner autonomy (67.7%) and authenticity (61.3%). Even though the development of a lesson plan was considered important in Question 11 (61.3%) (see Appendix III), it was not singled out as the most helpful aspect of the theory presented in the module (Question 12, Appendix III). Finally, instructional sequences (i.e. pre-/while-/post, TBL, etc) and strategies instruction were selected as the least helpful parts of the theory (see Appendix III; also, see Figure 4 below).

The questions relating to the AGG53 module resulted in the identification of Needs Analysis as the most helpful aspect of the acquired theory (87.1%) while the learning types, multiple intelligences theory and motivation were given prominence, too (61.3%). Although textbook evaluation attracted attention in Question 14 (67.7%) (see Appendix III), it was not selected as the most helpful aspect of the module. Following the points raised in the qualitative phase of the research, the theoretical discussion on the various types of syllabi was identified as the least helpful aspect of the theory presented in the study material of the AGG53 module (32.2%) (see Appendix III; also, see Figure 4 below).

Figure 4: The classroom utility value of the theoretical aspects of the AGG52 and AGG53 modules
It should be noted here that due to the small number of responses to the questionnaire, 31 in total, research conclusions could not be generalised. However, they can be considered in conjunction with the findings of the first phase, as they could be conducive to the identification of trends related to the attitudes of student teachers towards the written assignments of the M.Ed. in TEF/IL course (see Kataropoulou, 2017).

### 7. Conclusions and implications

The research presented in this paper can attest that the attitudes of the participants regarding the utility value of the theory presented in both modules generally coincide with previous research findings (see Paraefthymiou-Lytra & Sifakis, 2011). In particular, both this study and the one conducted by Paraefthymiou-Lytra and Sifakis (2011) highlighted, on the one hand, the positive perceptions of M.Ed. students/graduates concerning the impact of the AGG52 module and written assignments on their teaching practice, and their negative attitudes, on the other hand, towards the theoretical orientation of the AGG53 module. Since the participants stressed the importance of Needs Analysis, it could be suggested that a Needs Analysis could be administered to the M.Ed. in TEF/IL students/graduates so as to redefine the AGG53 framework in terms of the applicability of the presented theory in relation to the teacher students’ actual teaching practice.

Due to the impact of the written assignments on the teaching practice, more weight should be allocated on them in the overall assessment of the M.Ed. students’ academic performance and, second, that more steps need to be taken towards the gradual restructuring and enrichment of the content of the compulsory modules so that they meet the needs of the M.Ed. student teachers as for the practical application of academic theory (see Paraefthymiou-Lytra & Sifakis, 2011). With reference to the AGG52 module in particular, it might be suggested that the theoretical concepts presented in the study material should be revised with a view to keeping up with recent developments in the field of EFL teaching and learning. For example, the concept of mediation, which signposts a shift in the treatment of language as a socially-embedded process rather than a system of rules (North & Piccardo, 2016; Stathopoulou, 2015) and views language users as social agents (Piccardo, 2012), provided for both in the IFLC (IEP, 2011) and the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2017), could be an important issue to raise when discussing the “socio-constructivist/socio-cultural view of learning” (Lantolf, 2000; Schneuwly, 2008, in North & Piccardo, 2016, p. 9) especially in the assignments on the skills of speaking and writing.

### References


APPENDIX I

The interview questions of the qualitative phase of the research

1. a) Στη μέχρι τώρα καριέρα σας, μελετάτε τα εκάστοτε αναλυτικά προγράμματα σπουδών αναφορικά με τη διδασκαλία της Αγγλικής γλώσσας;
   β) Από το Σεπτέμβριο του 2016 εφαρμόζεται στα δημόσια δημοτικά και γυμνάσια της χώρας το «Ενιαίο Πρόγραμμα Σπουδών για τις ξένες Γλώσσες» (ΕΠΣ – ΞΓ). Χρειάστηκε να μελετήσετε ενδελεχότερα το περιεχόμενό του στο πλαίσιο των γραπτών εργασιών για τις υποχρεωτικές θεματικές Ενότητες (Θ.Ε.) ΑΓΓ52 & ΑΓΓ53;
2. Αναφορικά με το ΕΠΣ-ΞΓ και δεδομένου ότι ήταν η πρώτη χρονιά εφαρμογής του, θεωρείτε ότι οι απαιτήσεις των γραπτών εργασιών των Θ.Ε. ΑΓΓ52 & ΑΓΓ53 σας βοήθησαν να χρησιμοποιήσετε τη θεωρητική γνώση που αποκομίσατε κατά τη μελέτη του υλικού των δύο θεματικών ώστε
   α) να προσεγγίσετε κριτικά το ΕΠΣ-ΞΓ;
   β) να εφαρμόσετε αποτελεσματικότερα το ΕΠΣ – ΞΓ;
3. α) Θεωρείτε ότι η εκπόνηση των γραπτών εργασιών σας βοήθησε να εμβαθύνετε και να κατανοήσατε τη θεωρητική γνώση που προσφέρεται στο θεωρητικό κομμάτι που μελετήσατε για την εκπόνησή τους;
   β) Σε ποιο βαθμό πιστεύετε ότι οι γραπτές εργασίες απηχούσαν το θεωρητικό κομμάτι που μελετήσατε για την εκπόνησή τους;
4. Ποιο κομμάτι / Ποια κομμάτια της θεωρίας που παρουσιάζεται στη Θ.Ε. ΑΓΓ52 σας φάνηκαν περισσότερο χρήσιμα στην καθημερινή σας εκπαιδευτική πρακτική αναφορικά και με την εφαρμογή του ΕΠΣ-ΞΓ;
5. Ποιο κομμάτι / Ποια κομμάτια της θεωρίας που παρουσιάζεται στη Θ.Ε. ΑΓΓ53 σας φάνηκαν περισσότερο χρήσιμα στην καθημερινή σας εκπαιδευτική πρακτική αναφορικά με την εφαρμογή του ΕΠΣ-ΞΓ;
6. Θεωρείτε ότι οι απαιτήσεις των γραπτών εργασιών των Θ.Ε. ΑΓΓ52 & ΑΓΓ53 συνέβαλαν στην κριτική ανασκόπηση της διδακτικής μεθοδολογίας που χρησιμοποιούσατε/χρησιμοποιείτε έως τώρα;
7. α) Θεωρείτε ότι οι απαιτήσεις των γραπτών εργασιών των Θ.Ε. ΑΓΓ52 & ΑΓΓ53 είχαν θετικό αντίκτυπο στη διδακτική σας πρακτική;
   β) Εάν ναι, με ποιο τρόπο; Εάν όχι, γιατί;
8. α) Κατά τη μελέτη σας για την εκπόνηση των γραπτών εργασιών για τις δύο Θ.Ε. εντοπίσατε κάποιες θεωρητικές έννοιες που θεωρήσατε μη εφαρμόσιμες στη διδακτική σας πρακτική; β) Εάν ναι, μπορείτε να μας αναφέρετε κάποιες;
APPENDIX II

The questionnaire of the quantitative phase of the research

Exploring teacher attitudes towards the written assignments of the AGG52 & AGG53 modules within the IFLC framework

Dear colleagues,

Our names are Maria Glava and Christina Stavraki and we have been working as EFL teachers in the public sector (at secondary and primary schools respectively) for over a decade. We are also studying for the Master’s Degree (M.Ed.) in the Teaching of English as a Foreign / International Language at the Hellenic Open University. We are currently writing an article under the title: ‘HOU written assignments: from academic theory to teaching practice. An exploration of issues, relationships and teacher attitudes within the IFLC framework’.

The present questionnaire is part of a small scale research that is being carried out in the context of our article. The purpose of our research is to examine the extent to which the theoretical principles presented in the compulsory modules (AGG52 and AGG53) of the aforementioned HOU postgraduate course can be integrated with practice. The research also focuses on whether the assignments of these modules could assist M.Ed. student teachers or M.Ed. graduates in the public sector to consolidate and implement the newly introduced ‘Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum’.

The questionnaire is anonymous and the data gathered will be used only for statistical analysis purposes of this article. For this reason, it is important to answer all the questions sincerely by checking the boxes that match better with your beliefs. There are no wrong or right answers. If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Thank you in advance for your time!

Best Regards,

Maria Glava and Cristina Stavraki

Contact information: mglava@hotmail.com
tinastavraki@gmail.com

Personal information

Gender: *

- Male
- Female

Age: *

- 20-30
- 31-40
- 41-50
- 51+
Current employment: *
- State primary schools
- State junior high schools

Years of teaching experience at a state primary or junior high school: *
- 1-5
- 6-10
- 11-15
- 16-20
- 21-25
- 26+

Academic qualifications: *
- University Degree
- Master's Degree
- Master's Degree in progress
- PhD
- PhD in progress
- Other (please specify):

Integration of theory with practice

1. To what extent did the AGG52 and AGG53 written assignments help you gain a better understanding of the theory presented in the study material?
2. To what extent did the AGG52 and AGG53 written assignments prompt you to reflect critically on your teaching methodology?

3. Was reflection part of your teaching practice prior to your undertaking the M.Ed. in TEF/IL at the HOU?

   1. Yes
   2. No

4. If yes, to what extent did the AGG52 and AGG53 written assignments prompt you to reflect on your teaching practice in a more systematic way?

5. Did the requirements of the AGG52 and AGG53 written assignments have a positive impact on your teaching practice?

   1. Yes
   2. No

6. If yes, which of the following factors was affected the most in a positive manner?

   - choice of classroom materials
   - teaching methodology
   - provision of feedback
   - mode of work in the classroom (pair-/group-work over lockstep instruction)
   - instructional sequences (pre-/while-/post-, TBL)
7. Were there any concepts that you came across while studying for the AGG52 and AGG53 written assignments that could not be applied to your teaching context?

1. Yes

2. No

8. If yes, could you mention the concept that you found the hardest to apply in your classroom?

9. In September 2016 the Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum (IFLC) was implemented in the Greek state primary and junior high schools. Did you study its content in preparation for the AGG52 and AGG53 written assignments?

1. Yes

2. No

10. If yes, did the theoretical knowledge that you acquired while studying for the AGG52 and AGG53 written assignments...

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<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>help you study the IFLC with a critical eye?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>help you implement the IFLC more effectively in your classroom?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
11. What aspects of the theory provided in the AGG52 module did you find the most helpful in your teaching practice within the IFLC context? (multiple answers possible)

- profiling learners / whole classes
- developing a lesson plan
- instructional sequences (PPP, pre-/while-/post-, TBL)
- authenticity
- strategies instruction
- learner autonomy
- communicative language teaching
- contextualisation of tasks
- Other (please specify):

12. Which of the above do you consider the most helpful? *

Keímena σύντομης απάντησης

13. Which of the above do you consider the least helpful? *

Keímena σύντομης απάντησης

14. What aspects of the theory provided in the AGG53 module did you find the most helpful in your teaching practice within the IFLC context? (multiple answers possible)

- types of syllabi
- stages in language course design
- designing a needs analysis
- writing learning objectives
- types of learning styles, multiple intelligences, motivation
- textbook evaluation
- task-based instruction
- strategy-based instruction
15. Which of the above do you consider the most helpful? *

[Answer]

16. Which of the above do you consider the least helpful? *

[Answer]

APPENDIX III
Presentation of the questionnaire results

1. Demographic data

Gender of the participants

- Male: 96.9%
- Female: 3.1%

Age of the participants

- 20-30: 36.7%
- 31-40: 49.4%
- 41-50: 9.7%
- 51+: 4.2%

Current employment

- State primary schools: 64.5%
- State junior high school: 35.5%

Teaching experience in the public sector in years

- 1-5: 25%
- 6-10: 12.9%
- 11-15: 12.9%
- 16-20: 41.9%
- 21-25: 12.9%
- 26+: 4.2%
2. Integration of theory into practice

1. To what extent did the AGG52 and AGG53 written assignments help you gain a better understanding of the theory presented in the study material?

3. Was reflection part of your teaching practice prior to your undertaking the M.Ed. in TEF/IL at the HOU?

4. If yes, to what extent did the AGG52 and AGG53 written assignments prompt you to reflect on your teaching practice in a more systematic way?
5. Did the requirements of the AGG52 and AGG53 written assignments have a positive impact on your teaching practice?

6. If yes, which of the following factors was affected the most in a positive manner?

7. Were there any concepts that you came across while studying for the AGG52 and AGG53 written assignments that could not be applied to your teaching context?

8. If yes, could you mention the concepts that you found the hardest to apply in your classroom?

   Indicative answers:
   - modes of work (group-work)
   - multiple intelligences and learning styles
   - motivation
   - learner-centredness

9. In September 2016 the Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum (IFLC) was implemented in the Greek state primary and junior high schools. Did you study its content in preparation for the AGG52 and AGG53 written assignments?

10. If yes, did the theoretical knowledge that you acquired while studying for the AGG52 and AGG53 written assignments...
11. What aspects of the theory provided in the AGG52 module did you find the most helpful in your teaching practice within the IFLC context? (multiple answers possible)

12. Which of the above do you consider the most helpful?

13. Which of the above do you consider the least helpful?
14. What aspects of the theory provided in the AG5G3 module did you find the most helpful in your teaching practice within the IFLC context? (multiple answers possible)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>types of syllabi</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stages in language course design</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>designing a needs analysis</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>29.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>writing learning objectives</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>types of learning styles, multiple intelligences</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>textbook evaluation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>task-based instruction</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strategy-based instruction</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teachers as agents of innovation</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15. Which of the above do you consider the most helpful?

16. Which of the above do you consider the least helpful?
Maria Glava (mglava@hotmail.com) is an M.Ed. in TEF/IL student at the Hellenic Open University. She has been an EFL teacher in state junior and senior high schools since 2002. Her current interests lie in instructional materials development, educational technology for ELT, EFL testing and alternative assessment.

Christina Stavraki (tinastavraki@gmail.com) is an M.Ed. in TEF/IL student at the Hellenic Open University. She has been an EFL teacher for 21 years both in the private and public sector. Her current interests lie in instructional materials development and the Teacher Development field.
The effect of the written assignments on teaching practice: The case of the Hellenic Open University’s M.Ed. in TESOL

Effrosyni KATAROPOULOU

The present study focuses on the teaching practices of students at the Hellenic Open University (HOU) M.Ed. in TESOL and investigates the extent to which the written assignments have an effect on these practices. It employs quantitative methodology, in order to examine the degree to which the reflective nature of the course has informed or transformed the classroom reality of the student teachers, in terms of their methodological choices, their attitudes towards learners and learner progress, as well as their own self-perception and roles as trainees. 177 teachers have participated in the research by completing a questionnaire and useful conclusions as to their beliefs and attitudes towards their teaching practices are drawn. Overall, a positive attitude towards the assignments is exhibited in terms of their innovative nature, relevance and applicability to actual teaching contexts. Nonetheless, a number of factors appear to affect sustained integration and regular implementation of new knowledge in classroom situations. Therefore, based on the research findings, as well as relevant literature, suggestions for further research into the links between teacher education coursework and teaching practice are made at the end of the study.

Keywords: teacher development, teaching practice, distance learning, written assignments

1. Introduction

In the broader English Language Teaching (ELT) field we can observe growing uncertainty about what teachers are called upon to accomplish in their classrooms, since in our postmodern era of globalisation the modernist clear-cut definitions of correct language use and appropriate teaching methods towards achieving native-speaker competence in the target language, are no longer effective (Canagarajah, 2016; Kramsch, 2014). Teachers nowadays are required to constantly advance their theoretical knowledge concerning English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching, while at the same time develop reflective and interpretive abilities enabling them to make informed decisions about what constitutes the best option in their own teaching contexts (Cvetek, 2008; Freeman & Richards, 1993; Prabhu, 1990; 1992; Widdowson, 1984). What is more,
increased attention is currently being given to the notion of teaching as a combination of easily observable "public activity", with less apparent "private, mental work" (Burns, et al., 2015, p. 585).

This concept of EFL teaching as a multi-faceted, non-linear and context-dependent procedure places great demands on teacher education programmes, which have to develop teaching expertise, enhance autonomous, ongoing learning and researching skills and promote creative engagement with innovative ideas and teaching practices (Hagger & McIntyre, 2006; Mann, 2005). Meanwhile, practitioners and scholars are rethinking previously held maxims concerning effective language teaching, taking into account the diversity and inconstancy of teaching and learning contexts and the significance of the role of the teaching context per se (Akbari, 2008; Akbari & Tavasoli, 2014; Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

In the absence of long-term, school-based teacher education programmes that address the changes in ELT mentioned so far, a growing number of EFL teachers in Greece, representing a wide range of teaching situations, opt for enrolling in the Hellenic Open University (HOU) M.Ed. in TESOL, in order to not only obtain an important teaching qualification, but also to develop as competent and reflective EFL practitioners. The written assignments they are required to complete in the course of their studies constitute a significant part of this developmental process, since they encourage student-teachers to relate theoretical knowledge to their own diverse teaching situations and to implement newly acquired knowledge in actual learning contexts (Σηφάκης, 2006). The present study attempts to investigate the effect of these written assignments on student-teachers' current classroom practices and in doing so fill in a gap in the existing literature.

2. Teacher Development

2.1. Main Principles and Aims

Teacher development is an evolutionary process of teacher education, promoting a whole person approach and the improvement of teachers' repertoire of skills, abilities and personal qualities (Freeman, 1989; Wright, 1992; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). It has broader aims than training and views teacher learning as encompassing a wide range of socio-cultural aspects (Fraser, et al., 2007), rather than implementing a set of recipes and trainable skills (Richards, 1990; Wallace, 1991). In developmental teacher education courses student-teachers are able to draw on their own insights about teaching and critically select effective classroom practices (Fraser, et al., 2007; Kennedy, 2005), which entails greater freedom and autonomy for participants, but also added responsibilities (Beaumont, 2005). Furthermore, since development by definition implies continuity, teacher development represents an ongoing learning process, expected to have positive effects on learners, as educators become better prepared to respond to diverse teaching contexts and individual learner needs (Manolopoulou–Sergi, 2005).

Central to teacher development is the interaction between theory and practice, which does not prioritise either form of knowledge, but, instead, promotes the development of “praxis”, defined as “forms of practice that are based on theory and which are used to develop theory” (Crookes, 2013, p. 94). Another key concept pertaining to teacher development is the significance of the trainees' prior experience as a contributing factor to their learning (Auerbach, 1995), as well as the value of experiencing new teaching practices and engaging in effective reinterpretations of those experiences through the process of critical reflection (Mezirow, 1991; 1998; Tse, 2007).
Reflection is, undoubtedly, a key element in teacher development, since it links together abstract theoretical knowledge and experience gained from practical implementation (Gyftopoulou, 2010; Korthagen, 2001; 2010). It can be defined as a form of critical thinking allowing educators to question their practices and beliefs and adapt them according to their working environment (Canagarajah, 2005; Korthagen, 1993; Mann, 2005). Operating on every level of the teaching process, reflective thinking considerably enhances teachers’ awareness of the problematic or dysfunctional aspects of their teaching and assists them to review and modify not only their practices (Loughran, 2002; Manolopoulou–Sergi, 2005; Van der Veen, 2006), but also their overall teacher identity (Moore, 2007; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Day, et al., 2006; Moé, et al., 2010). This type of critical thinking need not be limited to private, individual work, but should optimally be a social activity (Brandt, 2008; Johnson, 2009), manifested in collaborative teacher development procedures (Long & Nguyen, 2010; Musanti & Pence, 2010; Stillwell, 2008).

2.2. Teacher Development, Change and Innovation

Teacher development as a process of ongoing learning and growth is often seen as synonymous with change (Guskey, 2002; Hiep, 2001; Pennington, 1990; Wright, 1992). However, the relationship between developmental teacher education approaches and change is not always as clear-cut as one might think. There are a number of factors which inhibit practitioners in modifying their practices (Bailey, 1992; Lamb 1995), even in cases of meticulously designed teacher education courses (Kubanyiova, 2012). The very notion of change often bears a sense of threat for teachers who react to it with fear and scepticism (Karavas, 2004). Meanwhile, the degree, or the levels on which changes occur in each individual participant of such programmes are inherently difficult to be accurately determined or measured (Allen & Negueruela–Azarola, 2010; Britzman, 2007) and sustaining the positive effects of teacher development courses also appears to be a thorny issue (Bastedo, 2007; Guskey, 2002).

When pedagogical changes are deliberately organised with a clear intent of ameliorating specific features of teaching practice, then they are usually referred to as innovations (Karavas, 2004), which can be any concepts, materials or practices that are considered to be new to the teachers or situations to which they are addressed (Markee, 1992; Nicholls, 1983; White et al., 1991). Innovations are even harder than changes to implement and sustain. Attitudes, beliefs and personal values that teachers hold, can seriously impede changes or innovations in educational practice (Beaumont, et al., 2005; Johnston, 2003; Pajares, 1992; Raths, 2001; Rivalland, 2007); therefore, they must be adequately addressed in teacher education programmes, so that they are judged by practitioners as directly relevant to their students’ educational needs, as feasible within their given context (Griva, 2006; Prabhu, 1990; Rogers, 1995; Tillema, 1995) and as encouraging autonomous action, on the results of which they can obtain clear performance feedback (Anderson, 1997; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Given the unpredictable and non-linear nature of classroom practice (Farell, 2008) and the large number of inhibiting factors to the implementation of educational changes (Gaies & Bowers, 1990; Manolopoulou–Sergi, 2001; Nunan & Lamb, 1996), it is essential for teacher development courses to instil attitudes of resilience in the face of obstacles and enhance educators’ autonomy (Graves, 2008; Rivers, 2011), self-efficacy (Sisson, 2016; Slavin, 2007) and ability to creatively overcome constraints.

3. The HOU Written Assignments as Opportunities for Teacher Development

The foundation of the HOU covered a long-standing gap in Greek tertiary education (Karalis & Vergidis, 2004; Kůmýa, 2015). The M.Ed. in TESOL, which was the first postgraduate course in operation from as early on as 1998, addressed a real need that teachers had for continuous
development and improvement of their practices (Παπαευθυμίου–Λύτρα & Σηφάκις, 2011). Operating in the context of distance education, its design and methodology enables student-teachers from diverse backgrounds and teaching contexts to access expert knowledge on the field of ELT and evolve as reflective practitioners, without leaving their working environment (Λαϊνά, 2011; Σηφάκις, 2006).

In the course of their studies for the M.Ed. in TESOL, HOU students are expected to complete four modules (two compulsory and two electives) and submit sixteen written assignments, the majority of which focus not simply on an analysis of the relevant theoretical issues involved in each module, but mainly on the outcomes of the practical implementation of new ideas, theories, methods or techniques in the students' unique and diverse teaching contexts. Additionally, they are required to submit a dissertation of 12,000 to 15,000 words to complete the Master's degree (Σηφάκις & Χιλλ, 2007). The written assignments of the course are considered to be a very significant part of the student-teachers' work in each of the four modules, despite the fact that they carry relatively small weight in relation to their overall mark. They can be regarded as "rehearsals" of desirable teaching practices and, though they obviously differ in content and aims, they all share common foci and underlying theoretical principles.

To be precise, assignments such as designing, teaching and critically analysing task-based lessons, conducting needs analysis in actual classroom settings, evaluating teaching and testing materials and innovating them, invite students to critically interact with a variety of theoretical issues and adjust them according to their classroom demands. They enable student-teachers to "formalise their intuitive strategies" (Ramani, 1987, p.9), and become theorists themselves (Widdowson, 1984), by informing the above described practices with their own perspectives, resulting from their teaching experience. The assignments' rationale is therefore consistent with the current pedagogy of "particularity" and "practicality", whereby theoretical knowledge is essentially context-sensitive, "enabling teachers themselves to theorise from their practice and practise what they theorise" (Kumaravadivelu, 2001, p. 541).

Furthermore, the written assignments adopt the latest, postmodern approach to literacy as a combination of “multilingual, poly-semiotic and multimodal features” (Canagarajah, 2016). Student-teachers are, accordingly, required to design and implement tasks that engage learners in interaction with a variety of texts, acknowledging that this interaction is a non-linear, complex meaning-making process (Mallows, 2002). Most importantly, though, the assignments signify a challenging role for student-teachers, by inviting them to act as reflective, autonomous action researchers, as they first identify areas that need improvement in their actual teaching situation, then design appropriate practices and finally they critically evaluate the whole process (Παπαναούμ, 2014). Teaching, in this respect, is perceived as involving primarily “problem-setting”, instead of “problem-solving” procedures (Schön, 1983, p. 42) and teaching practice is regarded as a process of specifying needs and relevant approaches to attend to them, rather than applying theoretical principles to a uniform classroom (Koziori, 2011; Ur, 1996).

Evidently, the distance and adult learning context, within which the written assignments of the HOU M.Ed. in TESOL are carried out, pose extra challenges to the effective implementation of their aims. Distance between teachers and learners refers, of course, to the spatial and temporal separation between them (Keegan, 1990; 1993), which renders an essentially solitary cognitive process, such as the completion of a written assignment, even more remote (Φαναρίτη & Σπανακά, 2010). More importantly, though, distance pertains to the difficulty students face in establishing relations between the course content and their own experiences (Marsden, 1996; Moore, 1993). Mediating this type of distance, referred to as “transactional distance” (Moore,
1993, p.22), is regarded as a particularly demanding task for both teacher educators and student-teachers (Hall & Knox, 2009), both cognitively and emotionally (Forrester et al., 2005). Meanwhile, the context of adult education places greater emphasis on learners' needs and characteristics compared to conventional educational modes (Kόκκος, 2005) and the students' adult status implies that they bring along firmly established beliefs and values about teaching (Knowles, 1990; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005; Rogers, 1999), which are difficult to be modified. Adult learners require challenging, flexible learning experiences, which they can accommodate to their actual practice (Jarvis, 1993; Hunzicker, 2011), without compromising their autonomy as experienced professionals (Bates & Townsend, 2007).

To that end, the course written assignments act as mediating educational tools, exhibiting the degree to which the course content has been internalised, despite the complexities that the distance and the adult education context involves. They have the potential to enhance not only participants' professionalisation (that is their status as qualified professionals), but also their professionalism, or the actual quality of their practice (Hargreaves, 2010).

4. Research Questions, Methodology and Participants

The present study investigates the impact of the HOU student-teachers' coursework on their classroom practices and addresses the following research questions:

• To what extent do student-teachers perceive the aims of the HOU written assignments as relevant to and important for their teaching practice?
• To what extent do the assignments have an impact on the participants' teaching practices, their attitudes towards learners and their own self-perception?
• What are the perceived obstacles to the implementation of the teaching practices promoted in the written assignments?
• Does integration of new practices, encouraged through the written assignments, fade with time? If so, why?

On the basis of these questions, an extensive, structured questionnaire (Appendix II) was constructed consisting of four Likert scales providing answers to the first two questions and a checklist of potential inhibiting factors in answer to the third topic. The final research question was answered by correlating data to the respondents' student status, that is whether they are current students, recent graduates or earlier graduates of the course.

Therefore, a quantitative approach was preferred as more suitable for measuring attitudes, beliefs and behaviours (Bell, 2005; Mackey & Gass, 2015; Wyse, 2011), in accordance with a number of recent articles on teachers' or learners' attitudes and beliefs employing the same methodology (Athanasseli, 2014; Karkoulia, 2016; Lykoudi, 2014; Tzanni, 2014). Moreover, quantitative approaches are more appropriate for gathering large samples, so that findings can be generalised without compromising reliability and validity (Agresti & Finlay, 2014; Dörnyei & Csizér, 2012; Kumar, 2014). In effect, the structured questionnaire implemented was selected on the grounds of practicality, anonymity and clarity (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009; Mitchell & Jolley, 2012; Schofield, 2006) and for overall project originality, as there was an absence of a similar quantitative study in recent literature.

The accumulated data was analysed though the statistical package IBM-SPSS 24, allowing for both descriptive and correlational processing (Pallant, 2014). Specific procedures were carried out, namely the estimation of the Cronbach alpha coefficient, which revealed very strong internal
consistency (Appendix III), the calculation of means and standard deviations, the creation of bar-charts for each of the sixty-three questionnaire items, as well as ANOVA and t-tests\(^7\), to depict statistically significant relations between variables.

A total of 177 respondents participated in the research and as their percentage reaches 12,1% of the target population\(^8\), the survey can be considered a representative one, allowing for generalisation of its findings. The majority of the respondents were current students of the M.Ed. course, however a substantial 42,4% were graduates. More specifically, 22,6% were recent graduates, having completed their studies within the last five years (2012-2016), while 19,8% were earlier graduates, who finished their studies between 2002 and 2011.

The sample in question demonstrates a broad representation in terms of gender, age, teaching experience and teaching qualifications of its participants (Appendix IV). The respondents were mostly female in accordance with the Greek EFL teaching context, where female teachers are the norm (Karavas, 2010) and almost half of them were Master degree holders. There was also a balance in the sample as far as teaching experience and context was concerned with 52,5% of the respondents being employed in state schools and 47,5% working in the private sector, mainly at private language institutes. Furthermore, all respondents had studied the first obligatory module of the course, that is AGG52 (Language Learning Skills and Materials), while the majority had also completed the second obligatory module AGG53 (Course Design and Evaluation)\(^9\).

Nearly one third of the sample has submitted all sixteen assignments, which are required for the completion of the M.Ed. coursework\(^10\). The average number of the respondents' completed assignments is twelve, which means that, overall, the participants in the study have accumulated significant theoretical knowledge and practical experience on the implementation of new teaching practices through their assignments. This is further enhanced by the fact that 85,3% of the assignments were rated as “Very good”, or “Excellent” by HOU tutors, suggesting more than satisfactory acquisition of new knowledge.

The participants also ranked their completed modules in terms of their perceived usefulness, by selecting AGG52 “Language Learning Skills and Materials”, as the most useful module\(^11\) followed by AGG66 “Educational Technology in ELT”. This confirms Papaefthymiou-Lytra & Sifakis’ (2011) findings and attests to the student-teachers’ preference for more practically oriented modules.

5. Presentation and Analysis of the Findings

5.1. Attitudes towards the Written Assignments

The results reveal quite positive views on the assignments' overall effect as the average mean score for the relevant questionnaire scale is 2,54\(^12\). Nonetheless, a closer analysis of the results allows for interesting observations on specific groups of items:
In particular, it seems that the most positive attitudes are exhibited towards the tutors, who are considered encouraging, supporting and providing relevant feedback. The assignments’ rubrics are, likewise, positively evaluated, since the majority regard them as comprehensible and feasible. What is noteworthy, though, is that in all domains, apart from “Rubrics”, the respondents favour more general evaluative statements such as 11a, which received a very high agreement percentage (85.3%), but adopt a less positive stance towards statements referring more specifically to teaching practices. This is particularly evident in the “Applicability” domain, where student-teachers endorse applicability of the assignments’ practices to their teaching contexts (11b, m=2.37), but appear less inclined to actually apply these practices (11e, m=2.54) and much less committed to regular implementation (11c, m=3.21). Similarly, in the “Teacher Development” domain, assignments are perceived as providing opportunities for teacher development and innovation, and as triggering changes in participants’ teaching practice; however, these changes are not considered professionally challenging (11j, m=3.71).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item Indicators</th>
<th>Item No.</th>
<th>General Opinions on the HOU Written Assignments</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td>11a</td>
<td>The assignments provided me with relevant theoretical background for my work.</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>.905</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11f</td>
<td>The assignments were better suited for state school teachers.</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>1.181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11g</td>
<td>My primary concern in preparing assignments was fulfilling my academic obligations.</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>1.161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicability</td>
<td>11b</td>
<td>The assignments were not applicable to my teaching situation.</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>.924</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11e</td>
<td>I continue to implement in my classes the work I prepared for my written assignments.</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>1.103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11c</td>
<td>The practices required in the assignments cannot be implemented on a regular basis.</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>1.150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>11d</td>
<td>The assignments were a great opportunity for teacher development.</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>1.193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td>11h</td>
<td>The assignments encouraged innovative teaching practices.</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>1.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11i</td>
<td>The assignments did not significantly change my teaching practice.</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>1.167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11j</td>
<td>I did not find the assignments professionally challenging.</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>1.072</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutors</td>
<td>11o</td>
<td>My tutors were generally supporting and understanding.</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.048</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11m</td>
<td>My tutor provided relevant feedback.</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>.956</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11f</td>
<td>My tutors generally encouraged creativity and originality.</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>.961</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11n</td>
<td>My tutors’ feedback was mostly theoretical.</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1.050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rubrics</td>
<td>11k</td>
<td>The assignment rubrics were too complicated.</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>.886</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11p</td>
<td>I could easily understand what I was expected to do in most assignments.</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>.991</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1: Attitudes towards the HOU Written Assignments*
These findings are in accordance with relevant literature on the mismatch between teachers' espoused beliefs and their respective practices (Amobi, 2003; Fang, 1996; Feng, 1990; Hos & Kekec, 2014; Larrivee, 2000; Owens, 2015; Roothooft, 2014) and suggest that student-teachers face difficulties in radically altering their established practices, especially on a long-term basis.

5.2. The Effect of the Written Assignments on Teaching Practice

5.2.1. Effect on Teaching Methods

On average, student-teachers have been positively affected by their written assignments in the teaching methods they employ, since the average mean of the relevant scale is 2.49. As the table below illustrates, the respondents' practice was most profoundly affected in making methodology adjustments according to their contexts. This is a particularly significant finding, which asserts that a chief aim of the course assignments (i.e. the link between theory and actual classroom settings) has been internalised by student-teachers. The same holds true for skills integration and communicatively–oriented activities, which constitute significant assignment requirements to be applied in students' model lessons. Participants additionally report considerable effect of the HOU coursework on increased use of the target language in class and on using more contextualised activities, involving pair or group-work and higher–order thinking skills. Furthermore, greater care seems to be given to lesson planning and to practising the oracy skills. Such findings attest to the effective internalisation of the assignments' aims and verify existing research on the positive effects of postgraduate studies on teaching methodology (Μπιρμπίλη & Παπαοικονόμου, 2016).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item No.</th>
<th>The Effect of the Written Assignments on Teaching Methodology</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12p</td>
<td>My choice of methodology depends on the teaching context.</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>.903</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12e</td>
<td>I usually integrate the four skills in my lessons.</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>.875</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12b</td>
<td>I use more communicatively - oriented activities than form – focused ones.</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>1.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12o</td>
<td>I have increased the use of the target language in my classroom.</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>.936</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12d</td>
<td>I encourage the use of higher order thinking skills (eg. analysing, evaluating, creating).</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>.939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12a</td>
<td>I plan my lessons more carefully.</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>1.093</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12j</td>
<td>I present new lexical and grammatical forms in context.</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>1.083</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12k</td>
<td>I use more pair work activities than before.</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>1.101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12l</td>
<td>I use more group-work activities than before.</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>1.178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12g</td>
<td>I have increased the time I spend on speaking activities.</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>.967</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12h</td>
<td>The use of ICT is fully integrated in my classroom.</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>1.071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12f</td>
<td>I have given more attention to the teaching of the listening skill.</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>1.142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12c</td>
<td>My lessons usually have a task – based design.</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>1.187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12h</td>
<td>I implement more process writing activities in class.</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>1.210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12m</td>
<td>I implement a considerable number of mediation activities.</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12i</td>
<td>I have introduced extensive reading activities in my classes.</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>.937</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: The Effect of the HOU Written Assignments on Teaching Methodology
However, as was observed in the previous scale, the respondents seem to give a higher rank to more general statements on teaching methodology, such as skills integration and communicative language teaching, and lower their score for more specific practices, like extensive reading, mediation and process writing. What is more, the low rating given to the effect of assignments on task-based lesson design supports evidence from research revealing that despite teacher training, the theoretical principles of task-based language teaching do not easily materialise into teaching practice (Carless, 2007; Karavas-Doukas, 1996; Ogilvie & Dunn, 2010; Richards, et al., 2001).

### 5.2.2. Effect on Attitudes towards Learners and their Progress

Communicative teaching practices, which are extensively implemented by student-teachers for their written assignments, place learner needs at the focus of the teaching process and encourage differentiation, learner initiative, emphasis on learning strategies and a developmental approach towards errors (Fairclough, 2014; Nunan, 1988; 1992; Richards, 2006). Nevertheless, the average mean for the relevant section in the research questionnaire was 2.55, revealing only moderate coursework effect on learner-centred practices.

The means for each scale item, indicate that the respondents’ coursework has positively affected their views about learners’ errors and grammatical accuracy in favour of more developmental, communicative and fluency–driven approaches. In addition, student-teachers report increased awareness towards learners’ needs, abilities and learning styles, as well as towards the learners’ first language, whose judicious use in class is acknowledged as a substantial source of knowledge and positive self-identity (Auerbach, 2016).

However, the course assignments have had a much lower effect on practices involving more initiative and decision-making opportunities to learners. Alternative assessment procedures, are not widely implemented by student-teachers, even though they were practised by a substantial

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item No.</th>
<th>The Effect of the Written Assignments on Attitudes towards Learners and Learner Progress</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13j</td>
<td>I treat my learners’ errors as an essential step in their learning.</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>.888</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13a</td>
<td>I plan my lessons according to my learners’ needs.</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>.978</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13i</td>
<td>I focus more on what my learners can do in English than on grammatical accuracy.</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>.934</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13c</td>
<td>In planning my lessons I consider my students’ differences in learning ability.</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>1.187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13b</td>
<td>I plan my lessons so as to cover a wider range of learning styles.</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>1.022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13e</td>
<td>I try to include learning – how – to – learn experiences in my classes.</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>1.045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13k</td>
<td>I am more aware of the importance of the learners’ L1.</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13h</td>
<td>My learners are encouraged to bring relevant material to class.</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>1.130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13d</td>
<td>I often use alternative assessment procedures (e.g., portfolios, projects)</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>1.929</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13f</td>
<td>My learners make a lot of decisions about the content of the lessons.</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>.944</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13g</td>
<td>My learners often decide on the type of activities they do in their lessons.</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>1.018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3: The Effect of the HOU Written Assignments on Attitudes towards Learners and Learner Progress*
number of student-teachers who attended the “Assessment in ELT” module. Such findings confirm the acknowledged difficulties and responsibilities that learner-centred practices entail for teachers, as they need to adapt to a multi-dimensional concept of learner identity (Ahmadi & Maftoon, 2015) and to more facilitating, rather than decision-making roles in class (Li, 1998; Nishino, 2012; Thomson, 1996; Tudor, 1993; Yoshida, 2003).

5.2.3. Effect on Teachers’ Self–perception and Role

The effect of the HOU M.Ed. in TESOL assignments on student-teachers’ self-perception and role as ELT professionals is measured in the subsequent Likert scale, whose mean score averages 2.47 (see Table 4). Most items on this scale score above 2.5, thus revealing substantial effect of the assignments on the formulation of a positive teacher identity. The respondents feel that their coursework has positively affected their ability to account for their classroom practices, and meet the demands of current work settings and curricular guidelines (Buchanan, 2015; Stillman & Anderson, 2015).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item No.</th>
<th>The Effect of the Written Assignments on Teachers’ Self–perception and Role</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1d</td>
<td>I can provide solid argumentation to justify my choices in the classroom.</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1e</td>
<td>I am more confident in what I do.</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>1.234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1f</td>
<td>I feel more responsible towards my learners.</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>1.288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1g</td>
<td>I feel confused and find it difficult to make decisions about my teaching practices</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>1.215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1h</td>
<td>I feel more confident about my linguistic competence in English.</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>1.273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1i</td>
<td>I often think about my lessons after I have taught them.</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>1.267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1j</td>
<td>I create more teaching materials of my own.</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.391</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1k</td>
<td>I often re-examine my teaching practices.</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>.944</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1l</td>
<td>I feel motivated to work harder.</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>1.043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1m</td>
<td>I am more aware of my strengths and weaknesses.</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>.776</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1n</td>
<td>I take more risks than I used to.</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>.965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1o</td>
<td>I am not very optimistic about the effect my teaching has.</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>1.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1p</td>
<td>I believe my work can make a difference.</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>1.089</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1q</td>
<td>I design my own tests.</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>1.089</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1r</td>
<td>I manage unexpected events in the classroom more effectively.</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>1.063</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1s</td>
<td>I manage my classroom time better.</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>1.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1t</td>
<td>I am interested in pursuing further studies in ELT.</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1u</td>
<td>I attend more teacher development seminars / courses.</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>1.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1v</td>
<td>I often conduct my own classroom-based research.</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>1.197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1w</td>
<td>I collaborate more with colleagues.</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>1.091</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1x</td>
<td>I get involved in observation procedures / mentoring schemes.</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>.949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1y</td>
<td>I get involved in student exchange programmes / e-twinning etc.</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>1.279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1z</td>
<td>I design teacher training seminars / events.</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>1.310</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 4: The Effect of the HOU Written Assignments on Participants’ Self–perception and Role*
Likewise, student-teachers report increased confidence in their chosen practices and decisions, heightened self-awareness and growing feelings of self-efficacy, optimism and motivation, in agreement with recent research affirming the positive effect of further studies on teachers' efficacy beliefs and resilience (Χαλκόπουλος, 2017). Considering the fact that in the postmodern era teacher identity is perceived as a multi-faceted concept, apparently shaped by a wide range of frequently contradictory cognitive and affective factors (Kano & Stuart, 2011; Mockler, 2011; Sachs, 2001; Zembylas, 2003a; 2003b), student-teachers of the present study appear to have formulated a considerably strong self-perception as teaching professionals. This positive sense of professional self is manifested in enhanced reflective thinking and more concrete teaching practices, such as materials and test design and improved classroom management.

Nonetheless, it seems that the effect of the assignments on student-teachers' sustained pursuit of knowledge is rather weak, since it has had only minimal to moderate effect on their involvement in further teacher development schemes, collaborative endeavours, or classroom research. It appears, then, that the improvement of student-teachers' professional identity is largely confined to their specific classroom domain; granted that commitment to lifelong learning, and collaboration with colleagues are, along with teaching skills and willingness to take risks, essential for the development of teachers as change agents (Day, et. al., 2005; Van der Heijden, et al., 2015), the respondents' renewed teaching practices seem to have had mainly short-term effects.

5.3. Factors Affecting the Implementation of the Written Assignments' Main Principles

5.3.1. The Participants' Perceived Constraints

Student-teachers perceive a number of constraints to the implementation of the written assignments' principles, reporting, on average, five inhibiting factors to the implementation of the knowledge they acquired during their studies, the nature of which varies depending on their teaching contexts.

Although lack of teaching time is reported as the most significant inhibiting factor in all teaching contexts, it can be observed that those working in the state sector are mostly inhibited by learner-related features, pertaining to their large numbers and their differences in level and motivation, while lack of resources and increased work-load are also significant constraining factors. A considerable number of state-employed teachers additionally report the negative impact of non-supportive collegial networks and inadequate training. On the other hand, teachers working in the private sector are mostly inhibited by external factors, such as the exam orientation15 of their curricula, parental expectations and work-load, which they perceive as considerably greater compared to their state-school colleagues. Notably, more than one third of the respondents employed in private language institutes regard learner demotivation as an implementation constraint and more than 20% include large groups and level differences, thus refuting widely held perceptions that the above constraints involve primarily state-school settings (Athanasseli, 2015; Μπιρμπίλη & Παπαοικονόμου, 2016; Lykoudi, 2016; Παρλαπάνη, 2017).

Finally, a greater percentage of private-sector teachers compared to state-employed ones, mention inapplicability to their teaching context and disagreement with the theoretical principles of assignments as implementation inhibitors. This finding, combined with the respondents' affirmation that assignments are more suitable for state school contexts (questionnaire item 11f, m=3.14), means that private institutes are perceived as settings where integration of HOU-proposed teaching methods entails more difficulties for the EFL practitioner.
5.3.2. Gender

Although the group samples for male and female respondents are significantly disproportionate (Appendix IV), a comparison of their means almost consistently reveals that male student-teachers display a more positive attitude towards their written assignments (Appendix VI); they also report higher impact of their coursework on teaching methodology, learner-centred views and self-identity and fewer constraints to implementation of the assignments’ principles, although not at a statistically significant level (Kataropoulou, 2017).

5.3.3. Age and Teaching Experience

The respondents are differentiated in their perceptions of the assignments’ effects, depending on their age. It appears that younger age groups display a more positive attitude towards assignments and report greater effect of the assignments on implementation of new knowledge (Appendix VI). The one-way Anova conducted reveals that the differentiation in teaching practices between age groups is statistically significant, concerning the participants' methodology and learner-centred attitudes (Kataropoulou, 2017). Such findings confirm the widely acknowledged growing dissatisfaction and demotivation of teachers as their career progresses, (Day, et al., 2007; Dingham & Scott, 2000; Rogers, 1999), as well as the difficulties older teachers appear to have in altering their established routines (Grossman, 1992; Nuthall, 2005; Rogers, 1999; Yinger, 1979).

In congruence to the age factor, teaching experience was correlated to the assignments’ effect (Appendix VI) and again more experienced student-teachers reported lower levels of effect compared to novices (Kataropoulou, 2017). This can be attributed to a more conservative orientation towards conventional teaching practices, which is often observed in experienced educators (Day, 2003; Fessler & Christensen, 1992; Huberman, 1995; Sikes, et al., 1985), but it
could also suggest that teachers with more classroom experience had encountered the novel ideas and practices required by their HOU assignments and incorporated them into their teaching prior to their M.Ed. studies.

5.3.4. Teaching Context

Anova processing of the data did not show significant differentiation between teachers working in public or private professional settings (Kataropoulou, 2017). Therefore, we can assume that despite the widely maintained belief that contextual factors shape implementation rate (Borg, 2006; Freeman, 1994; Haneda & Sherman, 2016; Hedgcock, 2002), in the sample under discussion contextual parameters do not seriously affect integration of new assignment-induced practices, though, obviously, they play a role on the selection of particular methodological options. This suggests that constraining factors to the implementation of practices encouraged through the HOU coursework, reside not in the participants’ broader teaching context (i.e. the type of educational institution they work for), but in the particularities of each respondent’s unique teaching situation (Appendix VI).

5.3.5. Achievement in Written Assignments

The participants’ achievement in assignments was correlated to their effect on teaching, yielding statistically significant results in respect to all the variables measured in the four Likert scales of the present questionnaire (Appendix VI). Apparently, the respondents with a reported high achievement rate in written assignments exhibit a more positive attitude towards them and perceive their effect on their practices as much stronger compared to those with lower rates (Kataropoulou, 2017), suggesting that student-teachers who have received positive feedback on their coursework probably feel more motivated and better prepared to implement the related practices in their contexts.

5.3.6. Student Status

A very significant factor affecting the participants’ views and respective performance in class is their student status at the HOU (whether they are current students, recent, or earlier graduates of the course). The relevant Anova carried out reveals that earlier graduates of the course (2002–2011) consistently report statistically significant lower levels of implementation and more negative attitudes towards the relevance of their assignments to their classroom reality. By contrast, recent graduates (2012–2016) and current students show greater integration rates and more favourable attitudes towards their assignment work (Kataropoulou, 2017; Appendix VI).

It appears, then, that the temporal distance between the respondents’ coursework and their current teaching has had a profound effect on their selected practices, as student-teachers possibly regress to the routines and classroom procedures they had established prior to their studies at the HOU. This tendency for the benefits of teacher education to gradually become disconnected from actual teaching practice is well-documented in relevant literature, more so with respect to short training programmes (Karavas-Doukas, 1995; Lamb, 1995; Sahin & Yildirim, 2016; Tomlinson, 1988), but also in relation to longer courses, such as the HOU M.Ed. under discussion (Hargreaves, 2010; Kubanyiova, 2012; Wolter, 2000).
5.4. Overview of the Findings

It can be concluded that the coursework aims are generally perceived as related to most EFL contexts, though student-teachers endorse more general theoretical statements, as opposed to specific teaching actions. They seem to have internalised the main, broader aims of the M.Ed. coursework, but still appear to lack confidence in specific teaching practices, particularly those involving more central learner roles. In addition, student-teachers appear hesitant to engage in further developmental, collaborative or action research activities, despite their reported increased feelings of self-efficacy. Though most respondents believe in the value and relevance of the M.Ed. coursework to their work, they do not seem to actually act upon those beliefs in equal numbers, thereby confirming the incongruence between teachers perceptions and their teaching behaviour in specific contexts of practice (Devine, et al., 2013; Fives & Buehl, 2011; Senge, et al., 1994; Walkington, 2010), while also pointing towards a concept of teaching as a complex, dynamic activity, guided by private, individual decisions and the demands of unique teaching settings (Kagan, 2010; Schoenfeld, 2002).

A number of constraining factors have been reported in answer to the third research question on perceived obstacles to implementation, the main ones being lack of teaching time, large groups, learner demotivation and increased work-load. Apart from these constraints, implementation is affected by the participants’ gender, age, experience and assignment achievement rate, while the effect of the broader teaching context is less significant. What is more, temporal distance between assignment work and current practice strongly affects implementation of new elements in student-teachers’ teaching routines, therefore the answer to the fourth research topic is that integration does, indeed, fade after the first five years following graduation. Apparently, the complexities of each teaching situation and individual affective factors contribute to teachers’ gradual reluctance to act upon the knowledge they gained through their HOU course, as is often the case with adult education programmes (Duff, 2012; Edwards & Burns, 2016; Trent, 2012).

6. Implications of the Study

The findings of the present study have far-reaching implications concerning the HOU M.Ed. in TESOL and teacher development programmes in general, which should aim for up-to-date content knowledge, relevant to the participants’ needs and applicable in their teaching contexts (Ball, 2000; Bax, 1997; Freeman, 2002; Mann, 2005). The reduced sustainability of integration levels reported herein highlights the need for ongoing teacher development and for more research into teacher education that acknowledges the complex relationship between learning and implementing. (Mann, 2016; Rabridge, 2017; Willet & Jeanot, 1993). Moreover, the relatively low rates reported on the implementation of specific communicative, learner-centred teaching practices, such as task-based activities, or alternative assessment and on developmental classroom procedures, such as observation and action research projects, suggest that these areas should be given more attention in the design of relevant courses.

What is even more significant though, is for teacher education programmes to develop their attendees’ capacity to evolve from superficial, general assumptions about their teaching to more in-depth evaluations of their own practices (Gebhard & Oprandy, 1999; Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015; Richards & Farrell, 2005) and the practices of their colleagues (Blue & Grundy, 1996; Cosh, 1999; Κωτσιομύτη, 2010; Psalla, 2013). This entails a shift from individualistic teacher education courses (Gebhart, 2005; Hargreaves, 2010) to collaborative development, where reflection on teaching is a social activity (Brandt, 2008; Leshem & Bar-Hama, 2008; Long & Nguyen, 2010; Stilwell, 2008; Tsui, 2003). Despite the obstacle of distance, peer-observation and evaluation
practices ought to be further explored in the HOU M.Ed. with the aim to enhance teaching awareness and sustained development (Diaz-Maggioli, 2003; Fanselow, 1988).

Such practices should also inform in-service courses, promoting collaborative learning to optimum levels, rather than the low rates reported in the present study. To that end, school-based educational courses need to be encouraged through policymaking and teacher participation, so that the school unit provides an environment where innovation in teaching is upheld by a mutually supporting collegial network (Connell, 2009; Λιακοπούλου, 2014; Vacilotto & Cummings, 2007; Tzotzou, 2014). The large number of constraining factors mentioned by the research subjects, combined with the well-documented low status of EFL teachers, chiefly in the the state sector, render the creation of school-based collaborative training courses an imperative development that will, hopefully, reverse the low motivation demonstrated in the current study for further pursuit of knowledge and action research (Edwards & Burns, 2015; Kershner, et al., 2013). In addition, taking into account the decreasing sustainability of new practices revealed in this survey, the need for follow-up courses on the M.Ed. in question, as well as on all teacher education programmes is also evident (Darling-Hammond, 2008; Waters, 2006).

7. Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

Being purely quantitative, the nature of the present study is mainly exploratory and descriptive, since the methodology used does not enable more in-depth analysis of the phenomena it depicts. It can be regarded as an essential first step towards formulating a general framework of the complex effects of the HOU M.Ed. in TESOL coursework on student-teachers' practices. The questionnaire's high reliability index and the large representative sample collected provide a substantially accurate and valid picture of the HOU students' teaching practice, but there is always room for speculation on whether the results of the survey are reproducible, or interpretable in a similar way by a different researcher.

Therefore, supplementary, qualitative methods are needed in order to gain better insight into the constantly evolving teacher identity and actions, as these are shaped through developmental courses (Leavy, 2015). Evidently, any research into teaching practice ought to be validated through actual classroom observation data or teachers' detailed accounts of their practices (Bartels, 2005). Longitudinal research is also suggested, so that the long-term effects of teacher education are captured (Watzke, 2007) and student-teachers' individual differences in beliefs and attitudes are highlighted (Faez & Valeo, 2012). Most importantly, in the light of the assignments' moderate effects on teaching practice, as these were reported previously, in-depth research into the factors contributing to this mismatch is invaluable, since it can assist us to seek out constructive, sustainable teacher development experiences (Johnson, 2006; 2009; Kubanyiova, 2012).

It can finally be maintained that the study under discussion has provided a thorough evaluation of a well-attended, distance M.Ed. in TESOL, in terms of its links to classroom procedures. Its strengths lie in the large sample collected and in its extensive nature, which covered a broad range of issues pertaining to teaching practice, thereby allowing a number of significant conclusions to be drawn. Its limitations highlight the pressing need for ongoing research into the complex, dynamic worlds of EFL classrooms, with the aim of further exploring the multi-dimensional relationship between teacher development and effective teaching practice.
Endnotes

1. Papaefthymiou-Lytra & Sifakis (2011) note the existence of this gap in the Greek EFL teachers’ postgraduate education, which, until the inauguration of the HOU M.Ed. in TESOL in 1998, was limited to rare, short-term seminars.

2. As of the academic year 2016 – 2017, the name of the course has changed from M.Ed. in TESOL to M.Ed. in Teaching English as an International/Foreign Language. The initial name is retained in the present study, since it corresponds to how the majority of the research participants referred to the programme.

3. The compulsory modules are "Language Learning Skills and Materials" and "Course Design and Evaluation". The elective ones are "Assessment in ELT", "Educational Technology for ELT", Teaching English to Young Learners", Teaching English for Specific Purposes", "Teacher Education in ELT" and "Intercultural Approaches to ELT".

4. Prior to 2004 students completed six modules and did not have to sit a final exam.

5. For each module students’ written assignments constitute 30% of their overall mark, while the remaining 70% is derived from a final exam at the end of the academic year.

6. An indicative example of a written assignment is provided in appendix I and concerns the first compulsory module of the course, which all students complete. In the appendix the developmental procedures described here are highlighted. A similar rationale is followed in the assignments of the elective modules.

7. ANOVA is used to determine if the relation between the different groups of respondents is statistically significant while t-tests establish statistically significant differences in the means of two variables.

8. According to the HOU Admission’s Office a total of 1468 students enrolled in the M.Ed. in TESOL from its inauguration in 1998 until 2017.

9. The codes used to refer to the HOU M.Ed. in TESOL vary depending on the academic year, however the title, content and learning aims of the modules remain the same. In the present study the codes which apply to the majority of students and graduates have been used.

10. It should be noted that students who entered the M.Ed. prior to the academic year 2002 – 2003 have attended a total of six modules and were required to submit approximately 20 written assignments with smaller word limits. Nevertheless, the small percentage of respondents who belong to this group of graduates answered that they had completed all assignments required, therefore, for statistical convenience the number of sixteen assignments was retained as an indicator of total completion of course requirements prior to the dissertation.

11. 118 respondents answered that they had completed all the required modules. For reasons of validity, the answers of respondents who had not completed all four modules were not taken into account here.

12. On a scale from 1-5 where the closer to five the more positive the attitude measured.

13. This refers to the 1 – 5 Likert scale used in question 12, where 1 stands for “Great effect” and 5 for “No effect at all”. Most answers’ means fall between 3, standing for “Moderate effect” and 2, representing “Considerable effect”.

14. 18,6% (n = 33) of the sample attended AGG65 “Assessment in ELT” and the mean for the questionnaire item on alternative assessment implementation was m = 3,09.


16. In a survey conducted among state school educators in Greece, female teachers were shown to have higher occupational stress levels (Antoniou, et al., 2006), which could account for the gender-related findings of the current study.

17. For analytic presentation of the statistical procedures carried out, as well as graphs on all questionnaire scales, see Kataropoulou, 2017.

18. Gemelou (2010), Gheralis-Roussos (2003), Sifakis & Fay (2011) and Lykoudi (2016) attest to the inferior status of English teachers in Greek state schools. Private language institute teachers seemingly enjoy a higher status, but their autonomy is considerably limited by the exam-orientation of their curricula (Angouri, et al., 2010; Papaefthymiou-Lytra, 2012).

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Appendix I

AGG 52: “LANGUAGE LEARNING SKILLS AND MATERIALS”: FIRST ASSIGNMENT*
ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟ ΑΝΟΙΚΤΟ ΠΑΝΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΙΟ ΣΧΟΛΗ ΑΝΘΡΩΠΙΣΤΙΚΩΝ ΣΠΟΥΔΩΝ
Μεταπτυχιακό Δίπλωμα Ειδίκευσης στη Διδασκαλία της Αγγλικής Γλώσσας
ΑΓΓ 52 – Language Learning Skills and Materials (Oracy & Literacy)

Assignment 1

The purpose of the first assignment is to help you practice and reflect on the theory and application of criteria for the teaching of the listening skill. To that end, you are first required to describe your teaching situation with regard to the teaching of listening. Then, you are required to prepare and teach an original teaching unit, with a focus on listening, lasting for approx. one teaching hour.

More specifically, this assignment is divided into two parts. In Part One, and in about 1000 words:
- Describe your teaching situation (e.g., student profile, curriculum and coursebook situation, etc).
- Describe and evaluate the teaching of listening in your current teaching situation; in doing so:
  o Refer to specific examples from the coursebook and other material implemented (photocopies of which should be appended);
  o Use the criteria arising from the module;
  o Recommend ways in which the current approach to the teaching of listening could be improved to meet these criteria.

Then, in Part Two, and in about 1500 words:
- Create an original lesson (lasting for approximately one teaching hour) that concentrates on the teaching of listening. In particular:
  o Produce one authentic-in-nature listening input, either a monologue or a dialogue, using the criteria that arise from the module (i.e., Burgess’ “ideational frameworks”). Use the above monologue or dialogue as the listening input of the lesson – feel free to also integrate, apart from these forms of input, any additional (listening/reading) input that you deem appropriate.
  o Please remember that you are required to teach the lesson.
  o Also remember to incorporate the actual tape-recording of your original listening input with your assignment.
- Describe the steps of the lesson, justify your choices and evaluate the teaching outcome with reference to the relevant theoretical criteria. In the appendix, provide a detailed lesson plan of the entire lesson.

The framework for teaching listening should be relevant for a particular class or group in your current teaching situation and should be accounted for with reference to the relevant criteria that arise from the module. It is important that all the criteria are adequately defined.

In the appendix, please be sure to incorporate the examples from courseware/other material, the transcript of the original monologue or dialogue and the lesson plans and tasksheets of your original lesson.

In this assignment, you are expected to portray:
- the ability to critically reflect on your own teaching situation;
- an understanding of the various criteria for creating authentic-in-nature listening inputs;
- the ability to comprehensively describe and justify a framework for teaching listening;
- the ability to create comprehensive lesson plans;
- the ability to discuss all these issues in a coherent and academically appropriate manner.

* In the same vein, Assignments 2, 3 and 4 focus on the Speaking, Reading and Writing Skill respectively.
Appendix II
The Research Questionnaire

I. PERSONAL INFORMATION

1. Gender: Male q Female q

2. Age: 21 – 30 q 31 – 40 q 41 – 50 q 51 – 60 q 61+ q

3. Teaching Qualifications:
   University degree q Master's degree q Master's degree in progress, q
   Ph. D., q Ph. D in progress, q Other, please specify q

4. Teaching experience:
   1 – 5 years q 6 – 10 years q 11 – 15 years q 16 – 20 years q
   21 – 25 years q 26 - 30 years q 30+ years q

5. Current employment:
   State school teacher (Primary level) q Private school teacher (Secondary level) q
   State school teacher (Secondary level) q Private Language Institute teacher q
   Private school teacher (Primary level) q Other, please specify q

II. STUDIES AT THE HELLENIC OPEN UNIVERSITY M.ED. IN TESOL

6. Student status at the Hellenic Open University M. Ed in TESOL course
   I am currently a student in the M. Ed in TESOL course. q
   I have graduated from the course in (year of graduation) q
   I have dropped out of the course. q

7. Which modules have you completed in the M. Ed. in TESOL course?
   AGG 52 Language Learning Skills & Materials q AGG 67 Teaching English to Young Learners q
   AGG 53 Course Design & Evaluation q AGG 68 Teaching ESP q
   AGG 65 Assessment in ELT q AGG 69 Teacher Education in ELT q
   AGG 66 Educational Technology for ELT q AGG 70 Intercultural Approaches to ELT q

8. How many written assignments have you completed for the course?
   ...................................................................................................................................................

9. How were most of your completed written assignments rated by tutors?
   Excellent q Very good q Good q Average q

10. Which modules were the most useful for your teaching situation? Please rank them, starting from the most useful module, using the relevant code (eg. AGG 52)
    1. ........................................ 2. ....................................... 3. ................................... 4. .................................

III. ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE HOU M.ED. IN TESOL WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS

11. What is your general opinion about the majority of the written assignments you have completed at the HOU? Please tick the appropriate box.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Neither agree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.</td>
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<td>d.</td>
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<td>Neither agree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
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<td>Neither agree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
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<td>g.</td>
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<td>Agree</td>
<td>Neither agree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
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<tr>
<td>h.</td>
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<td>Neither agree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
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<td>Disagree</td>
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<tr>
<td>m.</td>
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<td>Neither agree</td>
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<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
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IV. THE EFFECT OF THE WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS ON TEACHING PRACTICE

12. To what extent have the written assignments you completed during your studies at the HOU affected your teaching methodology? Please tick the appropriate box.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Great effect</th>
<th>Considerable effect</th>
<th>Moderate effect</th>
<th>Minimal effect</th>
<th>No effect at all</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td>q1</td>
<td>q2</td>
<td>q3</td>
<td>q4</td>
<td>q5</td>
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<td>b.</td>
<td>q1</td>
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<td>q4</td>
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<td>c.</td>
<td>q1</td>
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<td>i.</td>
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13. To what extent has the work you did for the HOU written assignments affected your attitude towards learners and learner progress?

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<th>Considerable effect</th>
<th>Moderate effect</th>
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<tr>
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398
grammatical accuracy.

j. I treat my learners' errors as an essential step in their learning.  

k. I am more aware of the importance of the learners' L1.  

14. To what extent has your work for the HOU written assignments influenced your own self–perception and role as a teacher?

<table>
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<th></th>
<th>Great effect</th>
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V. INHIBITING FACTORS TO IMPLEMENTATION

15. What factors do you feel inhibit the implementation in your classes of the knowledge you have acquired at the HOU? Please tick the appropriate boxes.

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td>large groups of learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.</td>
<td>great difference in learners' level of English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.</td>
<td>demotivated learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d.</td>
<td>lack of teaching time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. lack of resources</td>
<td>q</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. exam orientation</td>
<td>q</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. parents' expectations</td>
<td>q</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h. pressure from authorities (administrators, managers, etc)</td>
<td>q</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. curricular constraints</td>
<td>q</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j. inadequate training</td>
<td>q</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k. lack of support from colleagues</td>
<td>q</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>l. increased work-load</td>
<td>q</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m. disagreement with the theoretical principles of the assignments</td>
<td>q</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n. inapplicability to my teaching situation</td>
<td>q</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other, please specify</td>
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THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME!
Appendix III
The Reliability of the Questionnaire's Likert Scales

### Reliability Statistics Scale 1 (Question 11)

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<th>Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items</th>
<th>N of Items</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.880</td>
<td>0.884</td>
<td>16</td>
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Cronbach's Alpha is 0.880 = 88%, therefore the scale reliability is **very high**.

### Reliability Statistics Scale 2 (Question 12)

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<th>Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items</th>
<th>N of Items</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.928</td>
<td>0.931</td>
<td>16</td>
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</table>

Cronbach's Alpha is 0.928 = 92.8%, therefore the scale reliability is **very high**.

### Reliability Statistics Scale 3 (Question 13)

<table>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.921</td>
<td>0.922</td>
<td>11</td>
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</table>

Cronbach's Alpha is 0.921 = 92.1%, therefore the scale reliability is **very high**.

### Reliability Statistics Scale 14 (Question 14)

<table>
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<th>Cronbach's Alpha</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.930</td>
<td>0.933</td>
<td>23</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Cronbach's coefficient alpha is 0.930 = 93%, therefore the scale reliability is **very high**.

**Note:** For analytic data on the reliability of the questionnaire scales, see Kataropoulou, 2017.
Appendix IV

Demographic Data & Student Status at the HOU

1. Gender

<table>
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<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
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<td>6,2</td>
<td>6,2</td>
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<td>93,8</td>
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2. Age

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3. Teaching Qualifications

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4. Teaching Experience

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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>16 - 20 years</td>
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<td>16,4</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 - 25 years</td>
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<td>14,7</td>
<td>91,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 - 30 years</td>
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<td>6,8</td>
<td>98,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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5a. Participants’ Teaching Context

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State school teacher (primary)</td>
<td>47</td>
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<td>26,6</td>
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<tr>
<td>State school teacher (secondary)</td>
<td>43</td>
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<td>50,8</td>
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<td>Private school teacher (primary)</td>
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<td>1,7</td>
<td>52,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private school teacher (secondary)</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>4,5</td>
<td>57,1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Private language institute teacher</td>
<td>65</td>
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<td>36,7</td>
<td>93,8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Private tutor</td>
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<td>4,0</td>
<td>97,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substitute teacher</td>
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<td>1,1</td>
<td>98,9</td>
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<td>Publishing company</td>
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<td>,6</td>
<td>99,4</td>
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<td>EFL consultant</td>
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<td>,6</td>
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5b. Participants’ Broader Teaching Context

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<tbody>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State-employed</td>
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<td>52,5</td>
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<td>6,2</td>
<td>58,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private institutes &amp; Private lessons</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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6a. Participants’ Student Status

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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Earlier graduates</td>
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6b. Participants’ Year of Graduation

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7. Participants' Completed Modules

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<th>Frequency f</th>
<th>Percent %</th>
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<td>AGG 52 (Language Learning Skills and Materials)</td>
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<td>100,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGG 53 (Course Design and Evaluation)</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>93,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGG 65 (Assessment in ELT)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>18,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGG 66 (Educational Technology in ELT)</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>63,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGG 67 (Teaching English to Young Learners)</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>27,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGG 68 (Teaching ESP)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGG 69 (Teacher Education in ELT)</td>
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</tr>
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<td>AGG 70 (Intercultural Approaches to ELT)</td>
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8. Number of Participants' Completed Assignments

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<td>13,6</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1,7</td>
<td>1,7</td>
<td>15,3</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2,3</td>
<td>2,3</td>
<td>26,0</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>2,3</td>
<td>2,3</td>
<td>28,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1,7</td>
<td>1,7</td>
<td>29,9</td>
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<td>48,0</td>
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<tr>
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<td>7,9</td>
<td>7,9</td>
<td>55,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11,3</td>
<td>11,3</td>
<td>67,2</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>32,8</td>
<td>32,8</td>
<td>100,0</td>
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9. Assignments’ Ratings

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<td>Valid Excellent</td>
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<td>32,2</td>
<td>32,2</td>
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<td>53,1</td>
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<td>Good</td>
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<td>13,6</td>
<td>98,9</td>
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10. Ranking of the M.Ed. in TESOL Modules according to Usefulness

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<th>Rank 4</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGG 52 (Language Learning Skills and Materials)</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>53,4</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>26,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGG 53 (Course Design and Evaluation)</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>8,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGG 65 (Assessment in ELT)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGG 66 (Educational Technology in ELT)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20,3</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>27,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGG 67 (Teaching English to Young Learners)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12,7</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGG 68 (Teaching ESP)</td>
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<td>.8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGG 69 (Teacher Education in ELT)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7,6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGG 70 (Intercultural Approaches to ELT)</td>
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<td>5,1</td>
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## Appendix V

### Crosstabulation of Inhibiting Factors by Teaching Context

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<th>State (Primary) n = 47</th>
<th>State (Secondary) n = 43</th>
<th>State (Substitute Teacher) n = 2</th>
<th>EFL Consultant n = 1</th>
<th>Private (Primary) n = 3</th>
<th>Private (Secondary) n = 8</th>
<th>Private Language Institute n = 65</th>
<th>Private Tutor n = 7</th>
<th>Publishing Company n = 1</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Large groups of learners</td>
<td>35 (74.46%)</td>
<td>35 (76.74%)</td>
<td>1 (50%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4 (50%)</td>
<td>13 (20%)</td>
<td>2 (28.57%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great difference in learners’ level of English</td>
<td>33 (70.21%)</td>
<td>24 (55.81%)</td>
<td>1 (50%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 (12.5%)</td>
<td>17 (26.1%)</td>
<td>2 (28.57%)</td>
<td>1 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demotivated learners</td>
<td>28 (59.57%)</td>
<td>23 (53.48%)</td>
<td>1 (50%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 (33.33%)</td>
<td>1 (37.5%)</td>
<td>24 (36.92%)</td>
<td>2 (28.57%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of teaching time</td>
<td>28 (59.57%)</td>
<td>31 (72.09%)</td>
<td>2 (100%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2 (66.67%)</td>
<td>3 (62.5%)</td>
<td>5 (73.84%)</td>
<td>5 (7.69%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of resources</td>
<td>26 (55.31%)</td>
<td>25 (58.1%)</td>
<td>1 (50%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2 (66.67%)</td>
<td>2 (12.5%)</td>
<td>20 (30.76%)</td>
<td>1 (14.28%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exam orientation</td>
<td>9 (18.14%)</td>
<td>5 (11.62%)</td>
<td>2 (100%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 (33.33%)</td>
<td>2 (25%)</td>
<td>50 (76.92%)</td>
<td>6 (85.71%)</td>
<td>1 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent’s expectations</td>
<td>17 (36.17%)</td>
<td>4 (9.3%)</td>
<td>1 (50%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 (33.33%)</td>
<td>1 (37.5%)</td>
<td>40 (61.53%)</td>
<td>5 (71.42%)</td>
<td>1 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure from authorities</td>
<td>8 (17.02%)</td>
<td>2 (4.65%)</td>
<td>1 (50%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4 (50%)</td>
<td>34 (52.30%)</td>
<td>1 (14.28%)</td>
<td>1 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curricular constraints</td>
<td>15 (31.91%)</td>
<td>14 (32.56%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2 (25%)</td>
<td>23 (35.38%)</td>
<td>4 (57.14%)</td>
<td>1 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate training</td>
<td>12 (25.53%)</td>
<td>4 (9.3%)</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6 (9.23%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of support from colleagues</td>
<td>12 (25.53%)</td>
<td>4 (9.3%)</td>
<td>1 (50%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 (12.5%)</td>
<td>11 (16.92%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased workload</td>
<td>15 (31.91%)</td>
<td>18 (41.86%)</td>
<td>1 (50%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 (33.33%)</td>
<td>4 (50%)</td>
<td>38 (58.46%)</td>
<td>4 (57.14%)</td>
<td>1 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagreement with the theoretical principles of assignments</td>
<td>2 (4.25%)</td>
<td>1 (2.32%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10 (1.53%)</td>
<td>1 (14.28%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inapplicability to my teaching situation</td>
<td>6 (12.77%)</td>
<td>8 (18.6)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 (12.5%)</td>
<td>17 (26.1%)</td>
<td>1 (14.28%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (“small groups of learners”)</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1 (50%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Appendix VI

A. The assignments' effect on teaching methodology according to gender

![Graph showing effect on teaching methodology by gender across questionnaire items](image)

B. The assignments' effect on teaching methodology according to age

![Graph showing effect on teaching methodology by age across questionnaire items](image)

C. The assignments' effect on teaching methodology according to teaching experience

![Graph showing effect on teaching methodology by teaching experience across questionnaire items](image)
D. The assignments' effect on teaching methodology according to teaching context

![Graph showing the effect on teaching methodology for different teaching contexts](image)

E. The assignments' effect on teaching methodology according to achievement

![Graph showing the effect on teaching methodology for different achievement levels](image)

F. The assignments' effect on teaching methodology according to student status

![Graph showing the effect on teaching methodology for different student statuses](image)
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Investigating the impact of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) on EFL oral production: a preliminary research on fluency and quantity

Διερευνώντας την επίδραση της Ολοκληρωμένης Εκμάθησης Περιεχομένου και Γλώσσας (ΟΕΠΓ) στην παραγωγή προφορικού λόγου: μια προκαταρκτική ανάλυση ευχέρειας και ποσότητας παραγώμενου λόγου

Gina PASCHALIDOU

The aim of this paper is to investigate how Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) could benefit Lower Secondary Education students in reference to the development of two parameters of oral output, fluency and quantity. To this end, two Art History modules were implemented in a class of the advanced section of Grade C Lower Secondary students for a period of seven weeks. A quasi-experimental pre- and post-test design was employed to measure students’ speech quantity and speech rate fluency in three phases: before the intervention, after the first and after the second module. Speech quantity was calculated on the basis of the time students spent talking and speech rate fluency was measured via two variables, syllables per minute (speech rate) and words per minute. The findings revealed considerable gains in fluency, especially for the words per minute variable, but inconclusive results concerning quantity.

Στόχος αυτού του άρθρου είναι η διερεύνηση του τρόπου με τον οποίον η Ολοκληρωμένη Εκμάθηση Περιεχομένου και Γλώσσας (ΟΕΠΓ) μπορεί να ωφελήσει τους μαθητές της κατώτερης βαθμίδας της Δευτεροβάθμιας Εκπαίδευσης σε σχέση με την ανάπτυξη δύο παραμέτρων της παραγωγής προφορικού λόγου, την ευχέρεια και την ποσότητα. Για το σκοπό αυτό, υλοποιήθηκαν δύο ενότητες Ιστορίας Τέχνης σε τάξη του προχωρημένου επιπέδου της Γ’ Γυμνασίου για μια περίοδο επτά εβδομάδων. Αντικείμενο μέτρησης, πριν και μετά την παρέμβαση, ήταν η ευχέρεια του προφορικού λόγου των μαθητών όπως αποτυπώνεται στην ποσότητα και το ρυθμό ομιλίας. Οι μετρήσεις πραγματοποιήθηκαν σε τρεις φάσεις: πριν την παρέμβαση, μετά την πρώτη και μετά τη δεύτερη ενότητα. Η ποσότητα του λόγου υπολογίστηκε με βάση το χρόνο ομιλίας των μαθητών ενώ η ευχέρεια
του λόγου μετρήθηκε μέσω δύο μεταβλητών, συλλαβών ανά λεπτό (ρυθμός ομιλίας) και λέξεων ανά λεπτό. Τα ευρήματα αποκάλυψαν σημαντικά οφέλη ως προς την ευχέρεια, ειδικά για τη μεταβλητή λέξεις ανά λεπτό, αλλά ασαφή αποτελέσματα σχετικά με την ποσότητα παραγωγής προφορικού λόγου.

Key words: Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), fluency, speech rate, quantity

1. Introduction

Several CLIL-related studies in Europe (Dalton-Puffer, 2011; De Zarobe, 2008; Van de Craen, Ceuleers, & Mondt, 2007; Korosidou & Griva, 2014, among others) report positive effects of CLIL on EFL learning. These research results, combined with the European language policy on multilingualism and plurilingualism since the middle of the 1990’s (European Commission, 1995; 2004; 2009; 2012; Eurydice, 2006; 2012), suggest that CLIL can be a solution to improving language learning in the minimum amount of time (European Commission, 2004). This can be accomplished because, ideally, CLIL does not involve extra hours added to the foreign language curriculum but, instead, it offers teaching specific curriculum subjects, which are normally taught in the mother tongue, in the target foreign language.

By definition (see, for example, Coyle, 2007; Coyle et al., 2010; Mehisto et al., 2008), CLIL is an integrated approach whereby a foreign language is used in the teaching and learning of a non-EFL subject with the goal of simultaneously acquiring both content and language. In this way, while learning another subject, the foreign language may be said to be learnt more naturally and unconsciously, just as humans acquire their mother tongue, as Krashen maintained in his acquisition-learning distinction (1982).³

While most European countries have included some CLIL programmes in state education, in Greece there is no official CLIL provision whatsoever according to Eurydice (2017). However, in actual fact, there are two experimental CLIL implementation programmes running in state schools: the CLIL programmes in the Experimental Primary School of Evosmos in Thessaloniki, which were launched in 2011-2012 and are still running, and their pilot extension programmes in five primary schools in the same prefecture, which ran during the years 2014-2015 and 2015-2016. In this article, I will present research based on an attempt to investigate if CLIL can positively influence fluency and quantity in oral speech after a seven-week CLIL implementation. The theoretical background for the study is presented in section 2, which is followed by the research methodology in section 3 and the findings in section 4. Section 5 discusses the pedagogical implications of the study as well as recommendations for further research.

³ Acquisition has been referred to as more important for the development of fluency. Among other scholars (see, e.g., Whong et al., 2013), Lightbown & Spada (2013, p. 38) maintain that: “Many learners are quite fluent without ever having learned rules, while other speakers may ‘know’ rules but fail to apply them when they are focusing their attention on what they want to say”.
2. Theoretical background

2.1. About CLIL

Apart from the naturalistic, semi-authentic conditions that CLIL creates in the classroom, where unconscious learning takes place, as we mentioned before, it is of paramount importance to also create a learning context which is challenging enough but not too demanding, since this may jeopardize the learning goals set. In other words, an effective CLIL environment should provide input of just above the learner’s level (i+1) (see Krashen’s *Comprehensible input hypothesis*, 1982, 2009) and avoid being over-ambitious. Additionally, CLIL should promote language production (Dale & Tanner, 2012; Ikeda, 2013; Mehisto *et al.*, 2008) by creating a learning environment which makes learners’ mental processes work at full speed and, in this way, forces them to exploit all their communicative means and skills and maximize output (see Swain’s *Output hypothesis*, 1985, 1995, 2000). The dialogue between the input provided and the learner output can only be realised through true interaction, scaffolding, negotiation of meaning and modification of utterances, as suggested in Long’s *Interaction hypothesis* (1985, 1996), Vygotsky (1987) and Lantolf’s (2007) sociocultural theories, albeit within different perspectives. The above theories, which frame CLIL, are set within the communicative approach paradigm, and, thus, we can argue that CLIL is not a specific method or approach but falls within communicative teaching/learning and uses content of school subjects to accomplish its aim. In this sense, CLIL is a post-method pedagogy (Kumaravadivelu, 2001, 2006; Scholl, 2017), a pedagogy beyond method, combining a rich variety of communicative tasks and having a real life goal— that of learning the subject matter—, which is particularly relevant to the heterogeneous in level and motivation Secondary Education classrooms in Greece. In other words, it can shift the focus from the learning of language mechanics, which can be considered either not challenging enough or too challenging, depending each time on the student level, to the learning of school subject content.

The above learning mechanisms and theories refer to foreign language learning, since they form the foreign language learning theoretical backbone for CLIL implementation, but they could also be said to foster subject learning. For example, just as young children learn their first language in a natural environment and they simultaneously learn norms of behaviour, various functions, and information transmitted from parents, CLIL learners are supposed to learn both the foreign language and the subject content taught. In other words, the foreign language becomes the vehicle for learning the subject matter and acquires instrumental value.

2.2. Fluency and quantity in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) output

Fluency, complexity and accuracy (CAF) have been treated as “the holy grail” in defining and assessing language performance (Housen & Kuiken, 2009). This set of parameters, when analysed and assessed, effectively determines the language proficiency of the speaker; this is the reason why CAF has been extensively applied by scholars in their linguistic research (e.g. Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1998).

The notion of fluency— in everyday terms— is closely associated with general language proficiency (Chambers, 1997) and, as such, it incorporates multiple features, such as lexical and syntactic range and complexity, and speed. In other words, people regard someone as fluent when s/he uses a variety of vocabulary and grammar, pronounced at a reasonable or high speed with minimal pauses (Filmore, 1979). We have to note here that, although the
concept and term ‘writing fluency’ does exist, fluency is most commonly perceived as a feature of oral competence and this is precisely what the present study attempts to explore.

This seemingly elusive but definitely multidimensional feature of oral performance, which is more formally defined as “the ability to produce the L2 with native-like rapidity, pausing, hesitation, or reformulation” (Housen, Kuiken & Vedder, 2012, p. 2), has been segmented into its numerous constituents and investigated accordingly. Tavakoli & Skehan (2005) have distinguished three aspects of fluency: speed fluency (rate and density of utterances), breakdown fluency (frequency, location and length of pauses and hesitations) and repair fluency (repetitions and self-corrections). Numerous variables have been identified to measure the three aspects above. Some of them are: speech rate\(^2\) (Blake, 2009; Iwashita et al., 2008; Kormos & Denes, 2004; Osborn, 2011), mean length of run/utterance\(^3\) (Blake, 2009; Kormos & Denes, 2004), phonation time ratio\(^4\) (Kormos & Denes, 2004; Raupach, 1987), pacing\(^5\) (Kormos & Denes, 2004; Vanderplank, 1993), spacing\(^6\) (Vanderplank, 1993), frequency of pauses - filled or silent - (Ferrari, 2012), length of pauses - filled or silent - (Kormos & Denes, 2004; Osborn, 2011) and repairs (Bosker \textit{et al.}, 2013). Among the aforementioned three aspects of fluency, I have chosen to examine speed fluency via the variables of speech rate and words per minute, which is usually used for reading fluency but has also been used in CLIL-related research (Escobar Urmeneta & Sanchez Sola, 2009).

Quantity of oral output, the second parameter to be examined in the present study, is usually measured by the total number of words a speaker utters (Dewaele and Pavlenko, 2003; Kormos & Denes, 2004). Quantity is closely related to fluency, as several fluency variables relate words or syllables to time in several variations (ratios of number of words/syllables to time, of speaking time to total time of output, of stressed words to time or to total number of words and so on). It is evident, then, that utterances – in whichever mode they are divided and measured - and time are interrelated; therefore, we can claim that, if the number of words a speaker uses is a significant indicator of quantity, time is an important indicator of quantity, as well.

At the same time, it is almost unanimously acknowledged by scholars (DeKeyser, 2007; Long, 1985, 1996; Skehan, 1998; Swain, 1985) that increased amount of talk enhances language acquisition, as it generates automaticity, improves syntactic processing and interactive skills and fine-tunes lexical usage (Skehan, 1998). Undoubtedly, an increased amount of talk presupposes increased time available for talking. Hence, we can conclude that the amount of time a learner chooses to exploit in order to speak is indicative of his/her proficiency. We could thus suggest that quantity of output can also be measured by the amount of time an interlocutor chooses to spend speaking, which will form part of our study in the present article.

2.3. Fluency and quantity of output in the CLIL paradigm

The bulk of linguistic research on CLIL has argued that positive outcomes are mainly associated with specific skills, such as reading and listening, vocabulary, fluency and quantity of output, and affective factors (Dalton-Puffer, 2008). The table that follows, adapted from

\(^2\) Speech rate: The number of syllables per minute.
\(^3\) Mean length of run: The average number of syllables between pauses longer than 0.3 seconds.
\(^4\) Phonation time ratio: The proportion of time spent speaking to the overall time taken to produce the speaking text.
\(^5\) Pacing: The number of stressed words per minute.
\(^6\) Spacing: The proportion of stressed words to the total number of words.
Dalton-Puffer (ibid.), classifies the language competences which are positively or minimally affected/unaffected by CLIL instruction:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positively affected</th>
<th>Unaffected or less affected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>Syntax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>Informal language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vocabulary</td>
<td>Pronunciation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fluency &amp; quantity of output</td>
<td>pragmatics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>affective parameters: risk-taking,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attitudes, motivation, self-confidence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Language competencies affected or unaffected/less affected by CLIL
(Adapted from Dalton-Puffer, 2008, p. 5)

We will now proceed to a brief overview of studies which have investigated fluency and quantity, usually as one or two parameters among a group of parameters measured to determine CLIL’s positive effects.

Increased lexical density\(^7\) and quantity were measured by Hüttner & Rieder-Bünemann (2007, 2010), when secondary CLIL students performed orally in a narrative task, compared to non-CLIL students. Fluency was also found to be higher for the CLIL group in Lasagabaster (2008) and in Ruiz de Zarobe (2008). CLIL learners’ oral proficiency in terms of fluency was again found to exceed non-CLIL learners’ in Mewald’s research (2007), but it was the high achievers that improved more. Fluency gains were also observed for CLIL students, after one school year of CLIL instruction, especially in speech rate in Juan’s study (2010) and in quantity of output in Whittaker & Llinares (2009). Likewise, quantity of output measured in number of words and sentences was found to exhibit the most notable improvement, among other parameters, in Escobar Urmeneta & Sanchez Sola’s study (2009) after a four-week CLIL intervention and Grum’s (2012) CLIL group also demonstrated fluency gains compared to the non-CLIL group in a complex oral communicative task. The fluency variable in oral production was found – among others – to be the one most positively affected through CLIL instruction in a recent longitudinal study and remained so after a 6-month delayed test (Perez Canado & Lancaster, 2017). By contrast, there were no significant differences in speech rate fluency between CLIL and non-CLIL students after two years of instruction in Rallo Fabra & Jacob (2015) and their hypothesis of CLIL students surpassing non-CLIL ones was not confirmed.

Beyond Europe there have been cases of CLIL implementation and research, for example in Hong-Kong (Lo & Murphy, 2010) and Japan (Ikeda, 2013), which have yielded positive results regarding fluency. It appears, therefore, that findings from research which has focused on CLIL’s impact on fluency are generally encouraging.

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\(^7\) Lexical density: The ratio of content words to function words in a text (Šišková, 2012). Content words are nouns, adjectives, most verbs and most adverbs.
3. Research design

3.1. Purpose of the study

The research presented in this article forms part of a broader research in the context of CLIL, which aimed at investigating learners’ gains concerning content, motivation, lexis and fluency, and focuses specifically on fluency and quantity benefits. To this end, the research questions formulated are as follows:

a) What are the L2 speech fluency gains obtained through the teaching of CLIL Art History modules on Lower Secondary education level?
b) What are the L2 speech quantity gains obtained through the teaching of CLIL Art History modules on the same instruction level?

3.2. Context, participants and sampling

Thirty two (32) students attending the advanced English level of Lower Secondary Grade C at the Music School of Piraeus participated in the study. The students’ level of competence ranged from B1 to C1, according to the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), as they had attended EFL lessons for 6-7 years before this class, both at school and privately, and they had been taught and evaluated for over one school year by the instructor-researcher. The class met for two weekly 40-minute sessions and the investigation of fluency and quantity parameters was finalized in 14 lessons. The choice of the particular subjects was made on the grounds of “convenience sampling” (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 129), which in the present study involved the students of the educational institution mentioned before.

3.3. Research instrument: the three self-regulated monologues

The present research followed a one group pre-test and post-test design (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). The fluency and quantity effects of the CLIL intervention were calculated quantitatively, unlike the way CLIL research has been usually conducted in Greece (Paschalidou, 2016), in order to determine the actual impact of CLIL on fluency and quantity rather than the learners’ or teachers’ perceptions of CLIL effects on their own learning. Dörnyei & Ushioda (2011) and Fereira Barcelos (2006) have argued that questionnaires, self-reports and interviews provide limited objectivity in measuring actual effects, so, this study is an attempt at a more objective investigation of CLIL impact.

Quantity and fluency parameters were investigated by means of three short self-regulated monologues, which the students had loosely prepared at home. The monologues were constructed following Burgess’s (1994) concept of grids as ideational frameworks. According to this concept, our minds basically use three different frameworks for organising ideas: grids, tree diagrams and flow charts. Grids were used in the study as the suitable framework in “represent[ing] the attribution of characteristics” (Burgess, 1994, p. 312) necessary for art critiquing. The learners had to keep notes on the pre-assigned topic and prepare a monologue based on their notes, imitating similar work which had taken place in the classroom. They had to decide themselves how

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8 Lower Secondary Education students are divided into two groups -beginner and advanced- when they enter Grade A.  
9 Convenience sampling is when the choice of the subjects is determined by whoever is available, in this case, the pupils of the teacher-researcher.
long their output would last, which is why the term ‘self-regulatory’ is used to describe the monologues. Learners’ output was then recorded, transcribed and analysed.

The first monologue\(^{10}\) functioned as a benchmark for fluency, as it was prepared and recorded before the CLIL intervention. The next two self-regulated monologues were constructed on the knowledge students had acquired about the Renaissance and Realism painting movements as well as Art appreciation material. Each of the two monologues was prepared and recorded after the end of the Renaissance and Realism painting modules respectively, the first elaborating on a description and analysis of a Renaissance painting and the second involving an interpretation of a Realism painting (for a better understanding of the three monologues, see an example of each monologue of a randomly chosen participant in the Appendix).

In the present study fluency was measured via speed fluency. The speed fluency variables used were syllables per minute (speech rate) and words per minute. More specifically, regarding fluency, the number of syllables of each student’s monologue was divided by the time (in seconds) spent in producing the output and the numerical result was multiplied by sixty to express the number of syllables per minute (syl/min), following Riggenbach’s (1991) and Kormos & Denes’s (2004) procedure in determining oral fluency. The second fluency variable was words per minute (w/min), following Escobar Urmeneta & Sanchez Sola’s (2009) study, a study which aimed specifically at CLIL fluency gains. For the self-regulated quantity aspect, the variable we measured was amount of time, which was calculated in seconds. The three variables were calculated by means of the online software Text Inspector developed by Xanthos (2011)\(^{11}\).

### 3.4. The CLIL intervention

The following is an outline of the CLIL intervention, the teaching approach, the choice of content as well as the lessons and the materials used. The CLIL experiment involved the preparation and recording of the students’ preliminary monologues, which were used as a point of reference for the research of fluency and quantity and lasted for two lessons. Then, the actual CLIL intervention took place. It consisted of two modules, the Renaissance painting and the Realism painting module, each one comprising five 40-minute lessons, and a sixth one, where the monologues were recorded\(^{12}\). Overall, the whole project lasted for 14 lessons.

Task-based learning (TBL) was used in the design of the two modules and their activities. One basic principle of TBL is that it should create learning incidents that imitate reality and tasks that focus on meaning-making and the solution of a problem with no specified predetermined language (Ellis, 2003). Since CLIL is constructed on similar premises (Coyle, 2011; Mehisto et al., 2008; Naves, 2009), tasks have been found appropriate for CLIL by CLIL researchers (e.g. Escobar Urmeneta & Sánchez Sola, 2009; Moore & Lorenzo, 2015). Yet, the present research does not follow an inflexible TBL method but uses ‘task-type activities,’ as

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\(^{10}\) In this first monologue, the students, using written guiding questions provided by the teacher, elaborated on the different forms of communication used by humans throughout history, focused on today’s modes of communication, and commented on their importance.

\(^{11}\) The ‘Text Inspector’ tool is released under the GNU General Public License: http://textinspector.com/workflow. For more information, see http://textinspector.com/help/.

\(^{12}\) Although each module was originally designed to last for four lessons, in real classroom conditions it was extended by two lessons (six lessons for each module).
suggested by Llinares & Dalton-Puffer (2015), since even Ellis (2009), a TBL pioneer, admits that there is no single task-based approach.

Art History was chosen for the implementation of CLIL for three reasons: first, due to its suitability to a Music School environment, not only because the study of another art might motivate the students, but rather because the school already provides an Art History course, unfortunately only for A Graders. Second and, most importantly, for educational and pedagogical purposes, since the Art History modules provided did not just offer a historical overview of Art movements but incorporated Art appreciation/critiquing features. In this way, the integration of Art discourse was more about ‘observing, analysing, interpreting and evaluating’, essential skills for students’ holistic human development (Dewey, 1934; Eisner, 2002; Gardner, 1983; Perkins, 1994), and less about ‘learning about’ Art. Third, the content of Art History/Art appreciation was found intriguing because it is an under-researched area in CLIL Secondary Education (cf. Art in primary education, Hanesová, 2015; Koptsis, p.c.; Matthaioudakis et al., 2013). Despite the fact that an official school subject of Art is provided in lower-secondary education in Greece, there seems to be no CLIL research related to it so far.

Regarding the procedure followed in the CLIL intervention, for each module there were a few introductory questions so that prior knowledge and pre-existing schemata could be activated (Bartlett, 1932; Carrell, 1987; Nassaji, 2007) and interest stimulated. Then, a problem-solving task was presented via printed visual material (e.g. cards depicting paintings, labels of titles of paintings, pieces of puzzles). Apart from these, audiovisual input was provided, and there was almost no other reading input apart from the instructions accompanying the activities. Thus, the skills involved in the CLIL intervention were listening/watching and speaking (e.g. collaborative presentations and role-play), as well as transferring newly-acquired knowledge on paper by means of note-taking. Finally, each module ended with an individual self-regulated monologue on a specific artwork. The presentation-monologue was on a topic discussed by the students collaboratively in class and refined individually at home. The students themselves decided on what they would include and how long their monologue would be, which means that, as already noted, the monologues were self-regulated.

3.5. Processing the data

The three monologues were transcribed with the help of otranscribe and, then, analysed with the online tool Text Inspector, in terms of speed fluency by words per minute (w/min) and syllables per minute (syl/min), and in terms of quantity by time measured in seconds (sec). The data obtained from the three monologues of each student and also the average score of the group for the aforementioned parameters were compared to calculate the variance between the three scores and, therefore, the changes in fluency and quantity of output.

4. Presentation and discussion of the findings

4.1. Speech rate

The analysis of fluency levels in learners’ output shows that, overall, there was some improvement, as had been hypothesised. As explained before, fluency was measured by
means of the variables of words per minute and syllables per minute. The former was observed to increase from 77.9 w/min in the pre-monomologue to 82.89 w/min in post-monomologue 1 and to 110.53 w/min in post-monomologue 2. In other words, it exhibited a gradually increasing variance: 6% between pre- and post-monomologue 1, 33% between post-monomologue 1 and 2 and a 42% total variance rise from the pre-monomologue to post-monomologue 2 (Table 2):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>pre-monomologue</th>
<th>post-monomologue 1</th>
<th>post-monomologue 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>words/minute</td>
<td>77.9</td>
<td>82.89</td>
<td>110.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>syllables/minute</td>
<td>125.67</td>
<td>123.12</td>
<td>149.22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Mean fluency scores for the three monologues

These results corroborate Juan’s (2010) oral fluency gains, where improvement was observed through the variables of w/min and pausing behaviour. They also partially correlate with findings from Hüttner & Rieder-Bünemann’s (2007), Perez Canado & Lancaster’s (2017), De Diezmas’ (2016) and Escobar Urmeneta & Sanchez Sola’s (2009) research, which reported improved fluency scores, although the fluency variables used in these studies were different: an evaluation mark given by one or more assessors to the output in the first, second and third study, which might be subjective and biased if there are no predetermined and explicit criteria, and the number of sentences and total number of words for each text in the last study. These differences subscribe to our suggestion that, while in the previous studies CLIL increased the quality and quantity of output, in the present study CLIL instruction aided the speed of students’ oral output, which, as we have noted before, according to various scholars researching fluency, is a reliable indicator of fluency.

Yet, the data obtained from the syllables per minute variable were less striking. They revealed that the syl/min score marginally decreased from 125.67 in the pre-monomologue to 123.12 (-2%) in post-monomologue 1 and then grew to 149.22 (21%) syl/min in post-monomologue 2. In general, when we compare the mean variance for the two variables, the syl/min was smaller (21%) than the w/min (33%) variance from post-monomologue 1 to post-monomologue 2 and it shrank more from the pre-monomologue to post-monomologue 2 (19% and 42%, respectively, see Table 3). This fact indicates that the number of words which can be uttered within a minute is not proportionate to the syl/min ratio. Generally, syl/min is considered a better indicator of how listeners perceive fluency than w/min according to some studies (e.g. Kormos & Denes, 2004). This means that, even when there is a great increase in the speed of the words articulated by a learner, the listener does not necessarily perceive it as a corresponding increase in fluency:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>pre-monomologue to post-monomologue 1</th>
<th>post-monomologue 1 to post-monomologue 2</th>
<th>pre-monomologue to post-monomologue 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>words/minute</td>
<td>+6%</td>
<td>+33%</td>
<td>+42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>syllables/minute</td>
<td>-2%</td>
<td>+21%</td>
<td>+19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Mean variance scores for the three monologues
However, according to our metrics, it is safe to say that there has been a considerable increase in the speed of fluency, more evident in w/min and less intense in syl/min.

4.2. Quantity

Concerning the quantity of oral production, it was found that the duration of the students’ monologues (time in seconds) showed a mean rise of 14.21 seconds in post-monologue 1 (from 89.09 to 103.3 seconds) but a significant fall of 47.89 seconds between post-monologue 1 and post-monologue 2 (from 103.3 to 55.41 seconds, see Table 4):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>pre-monologue</th>
<th>post-monologue 1</th>
<th>post-monologue 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>time in seconds</td>
<td>89.09</td>
<td>103.03</td>
<td>55.41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Mean duration for the three monologues

The fact that the mean duration of the third monologue was considerably shorter than both the first and the second monologue might be due to the demands of the specific task of artwork interpretation. Another reason explaining the shorter duration of post-monologue 2 could be students’ fatigue after 14 weeks of intensive CLIL Art modules.

However, despite the duration of post-monologue 2 being much shorter than that of the first two monologues, the w/min and syl/min ratios were higher, as has already been mentioned, which demonstrated that students talked gradually faster as the CLIL intervention progressed, even if they could not sustain their self-regulated monologue longer:

![Figure 1: Mean duration and fluency scores for the three monologues](image_url)
Figure 1 represents both speech rate fluency and quantity scores and reveals the simultaneous improvement in speech rate and deterioration in quantity of oral production measured in seconds. Hence, in terms of quantity, we can identify a correlation with Jiménez Catalán et al.’s (2006) study, where students were found to produce less although they improved in other aspects of CAF, such as lexical density.

5. Discussion

5.1. Pedagogical implications of the study

The findings analysed in this article concern the impact of CLIL solely on the fluency and quantity of oral output, with the aim of contributing to CLIL research in the context of Greek Secondary Education. The study included a CLIL Art History intervention addressed to 32 students who belonged to the advanced section of Grade C Lower-Secondary Education, attending a specialised school, a Music High School, and, in this sense, it has its limitations. However, it suggests that even within a two-month period of CLIL instruction, improvement in speech rate fluency may be salient. In the present study fluency measurements revealed considerable gains, manifested especially in the w/min ratio but also in the syl/min ratio to a lesser degree. These results were confirmed by previous research (e.g. Grum, 2012; Juan, 2010; Sarmiento Salamanca & Pinilla Jimenez, 2016), although usually measured by different instruments and, generally, by different research methods, or by being related to writing fluency. Quantity, which was measured by the self-regulated duration of monologues, yielded less conclusive results, as it showed an increase in post-monologue 1 when compared to the pre-monologue but a considerable fall in post-monologue 2.

In general, we can argue that there may be benefits derived from CLIL implementation, particularly in the context of Greek Secondary State Education. In the specific educational and pedagogical context, where most students have been formally instructed in the target language and have already mastered at least an intermediate level of English but have difficulty in producing language either orally or in written form, fluency is one of the skills that need improvement. CLIL can offer a lot of practice and exposure to the L2 in a meaningful and naturalistic environment while catering for content knowledge; therefore, the already existing EFL knowledge of the students can function as the L2 threshold that Zydati (2012) maintains is necessary to “support subject-matter learning” (p. 27) and the learners are able to study modules or parts of content areas that interest them. CLIL modules could possibly be integrated in the Greek EFL classroom, their duration ranging from two to four weeks (or more), which is translated into a minimum of four to eight sessions in real class time but they would be an intensive immersion into modules of subject matter, which may substantially improve learners’ speed fluency as well as quantity of output.

5.2. Limitations and recommendations for further research

As we have seen, the study revealed improved scores in fluency. Yet, high scores in speech rate fluency are not enough for oral output to be perceived as complete, effective and qualitative. Only in conjunction with the other variables of CAF, accuracy and complexity, as well as relevant content, can they ensure effective performance.

Thus, in order for the results of this small-scale research to be further substantiated, the other two variables of CAF need to be measured and juxtaposed to fluency and quantity. Complexity, which is distinguished into lexical and grammatical complexity, to be further
divided into its three components, namely diversity, density and sophistication (Bulté et al., 2008), and accuracy, which again can be divided into lexical and grammatical accuracy, could be measured to triangulate our findings. Finally, it would be fruitful to study how fluency – probably along with complexity and accuracy – may contribute to communicative adequacy/appropriateness, which is the ability to communicate successfully in real-world situations, as this is the primary goal of EFL learning. In other words, it would be interesting to know “what linguistic features contribute to communicatively adequate speech” (Resvez et al., 2016, p. 828), another under-researched issue. Additionally, generalisation of our findings would require more participants while the study could be extended to less advanced learners in other school contexts.

Generally, further research in different contexts, inclusive of more participants and combining measurements in other CAF parameters, would provide more conclusive answers to our CLIL research questions.

References


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**Appendix**

**Transcription of participant 1 pre-monologue**

Em e: people communicated e: in the past with letters (.) pigeons e ha-hands (.) e::: different types of communication today e: is (.) chat, letters (.) e: e-email (.) and social media e::: (.) E::: the::: telephone is important because e: we can communicate with others e:::m (.) and from distance e::: (.) E::: it wasn’t possible to have phone fifty (.) hundred years ago e::: because we had didn’t el-electricity e::: (.) e::: if we (.) wouldn’t have e::: (.) electricity we e::: we wouldn’t have lights e:::

**Transcription of participant 1 post-monologue 1**

E:::m, I will talk about e::: the artist Boticelli, e:::, he made the::: e::: the artwork allegory of spring, e:::, he::: mm::: (.) ((greek)) e::: the genre is, religious, e::: the medium is painting. (.)
em () ((greek)) e::: the lines are wavy and () curvy, e:::m the shape are normal e:::m because the people are long () and the form is normal, e::: the colours are warm like ( ) red, light colours, a:::nd the background is black, e::: the focal point is the woman in the centre e::: () because he wear a red dress (.) a:::nd the painting has a flowers and e::: fruits a:::nd it's black surrounding, (.) there is a balance because u:::h one side they are three people and other side they are four, e::: there is harmony because the colours are light, e::: and the background is black, and the figures are light.

Transcription of participant 1 post-monologue 2
Hm: I will (. ) describe e::: the painting, e::: which is the name is the orphans e::: I think the::: painter trying to say about poverty because . hhh there are five orphans and they are waiting . hhh the older girl hm: to prepare the food, e:::m a:::nd also the picture is more dark, and the walls are older (.) so::: e:::m so that is the reason that e::: the painter use dark (.) and brown colours, e:::m and I think that he made this painting to show, e::: the poverty and the starvation, e:::m tha-e::: he made this technique e::: with black colours . hhh e::: to show the difficulty.

Transcription conventions were based on Have (1999) and Pouliaos (2011).

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Challenges in ESP/EAP Teaching at a Greek University: ‘Inter-scientificity’ in interdisciplinary fields

Ekaterini NIKOLAREA

This study aims to answer the question how Greek undergraduate students - who are required to read lots of specialised materials in English and use the knowledge they acquire in their Greek parallel classes and/or write essays in English in Erasmus schemes - can achieve a good use of scientific discourse in an ESP/EAP course. Issues of interdisciplinarity, ‘inter-scientificity’ and culture involved in designing an ESP/ EAP course taught at a Greek university are also addressed. First, this paper identifies and defines ‘inter-scientificity’ in English and Modern Greek, which is one of the most problematic areas of interdisciplinary fields - such as Geography, Cultural Technology and Communication, Social Anthropology and History, Sociology and Marine Sciences. Second, it provides six examples of the interrelationship between ‘inter-scientificity’ and intercultural competence and discusses how ‘inter-scientificity’ can be incorporated in ESP/EAP teaching so that Greek undergraduate students of any field can reach a good use of specialized language across disciplines in English and Greek. Finally, drawing on her eighteen-year teaching experience, the writer would claim that an ESP/EAP teacher at a Greek University should not only use his/her knowledge of specialized English and Greek but also be familiar with methodologies of Translation Studies and Lexicography.

Key words: ‘glocal’, ‘glocalisation’, unidirectional transfer, reverse unidirectional transfer, bidirectional transfer, directionality, interdisciplinarity ‘inter-scientificity’, ‘reverse inter-scientificity’ ‘evolving’ bilingualism, polysemy, polysemes.

1. The academic context

Greek undergraduate students usually have to search for and read a substantial number of references written in English (the global language) and use the knowledge acquired through extensive reading in oral presentations and essays written for their parallel courses whose language of instruction is Greek (the local language). Moreover, some of
these students are strongly interested in participating in Erasmus schemes, where they should perform totally in English.

Therefore, how can ESP/EAP\(^1\) teaching in Departments such as: Geography, Cultural Technology and Communication, Social Anthropology and History, Sociology and Marine Sciences help Greek undergraduate students move with ease between global and local or glocal\(^2\) knowledge-based environments?

### 1.1. Student practices

During our English classes in Departments such as: Geography, Cultural Technology and Communication, Social Anthropology and History, Sociology and Marine Sciences, we have observed that students read and comprehend specialised English texts and then transfer their acquired knowledge to spoken and/or written Greek in their parallel classes. Regardless of their level of language competence, the main sources of our students’ difficulty in understanding ESP texts seem to be the polysemy of a variety of terms and the lack of bilingual specialised dictionaries.

As soon as our students understand a difficult text, they usually re-elaborate it in Greek in three forms: a summary, which they include in their essays; an oral presentation; and/or a translation. All three forms of transfer are ‘unidirectional’ and are illustrated in Figure 1 where English represents global (scientific) communication (g) that is transferred to Greek, the means of local communication (l).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Greek</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Figure 1: Unidirectional transfer g: l.

The term ‘unidirectional transfer’ implies the concept of ‘directionality’, a concept of Translation Studies.\(^3\) Within this context, we can claim that during a ‘unidirectional’ transfer the global language (English) meets and interacts with the local language (Greek) in a topos/locus that carries signifiers of both languages, scientific discourses and assumes a new glocalised identity.

Nevertheless, during their undergraduate and postgraduate studies (in Erasmus schemes, for example) as well as during their career, Greek students and prospective professionals (or academics) will encounter a challenge of opposite directionality; that is, they will have to transfer their knowledge from Greek (the local language) into English (the global language) in order to communicate local (national) situations (l) to global (international) contexts (g). In this case, the directionality of this transfer is reverse as shown in Figure 2.

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\(^1\) ESP: English for Specific Purposes and EAP: English for Academic Purposes.

\(^2\) For the notion of glocal and globalisation, see R. Robertson (1994, 1995, 2004, 2006 and 2013). In the present context, the concept of glocalisation is understood as diverse types of interrelationship and interdependency between local and global linguistic and cultural processes, which reveal the impact of the global (English as lingua franca) upon the local (Greek).

\(^3\) Directionality’ relates to whether translators/interpreters work from their mother tongue into the foreign language or the other way. For a discussion of the issues and debate surrounding the concept of ‘directionality’ in Translation Studies, see Hatim 2001: 164-168.
Of course, students, if forced by circumstances, may have to move back and forth between two, at least, different linguistic, scientific and cultural systems (i.e. between Greek and English), thus in a *glocalised* academic and/or business environment. Then, we talk about a *bi-directional* transfer presented as follows:

In all students’ real and potential interactive situations – that is, within Greek parallel classes, ESP/EAP classes and in Erasmus schemes situations, when students are made to move between local and global (scientific) situations as presented in Figures 1-3 - *English* encounters *Greek* forcing students to develop an *evolving bilingualism* (Nikolarea, 2014). This kind of bilingualism has been very conspicuous in a union of states like the European Union (EU), and needs to be dealt with by member-states, institutions, teachers and learners, if they want to communicate, interact and thrive in an ever increasing globalised world. Fortunately, the Council of Europe deals with this ‘evolving’ bilingualism in that it has recognised that European citizens should develop and be examined upon their ‘mediation’ skills, because the latter allow the former to *mediate* and *move* between their own language, scientific domain and culture and those of other European citizens’ (*Common European Framework*, 2001, esp. Chapter 8).

2. Teaching ESP/EAP for various scientific fields: An interdisciplinary challenge

2.1. The interdisciplinarity of various fields

Geography, Social Anthropology and History, Cultural Technology and Communication, Sociology and Marine Sciences are interdisciplinary fields of study that combine Social and/or Natural Sciences in the study of a broad variety of social and environmental phenomena, such as urban, regional and rural development, tourism development, migration, social exclusion, globalisation, geopolitical conflicts, land degradation, desertification in a historical context. Thus, the undergraduate students of these fields must be equipped with the necessary knowledge, expertise and skills to analyse and recommend feasible and sustainable solutions to contemporary spatial, social, economic and environmental problems (Gerber and Lidstone, 1996; Kneaile, 2003).

2.2. A challenge for ESP/EAP teachers and Greek undergraduate students of various interdisciplinary fields

It is precisely the interdisciplinarity of Geography, Social Anthropology and History, Cultural Technology and Communication, Sociology and Marine Sciences that become a multi-leveled challenge for ESP teachers and Greek undergraduate students alike. First, the lack of...
bilingual dictionaries or glossaries for these disciplines points to the fact that either an official terminology has yet to be established or it is still being developed. Second, if Greek undergraduate (and postgraduate) students have to read bibliographical references in English and then reproduce the knowledge they acquire in Greek, how can they do so if there are no specialized bilingual dictionaries or glossaries? Last but not least, the aforementioned fields, as interdisciplinary fields, draw upon different disciplines and their terminology is now being re-contextualized to meet their specific needs.  

3. From interdisciplinarity to ‘inter-scientificity’ and ‘reverse inter-scientificity’ – their methodological novelty explained

We shall now examine some specific cases of polysemy in order to illustrate that the interdisciplinarity of fields such as: Geography, Social Anthropology and History, Cultural Technology and Communication, Sociology and Marine Sciences requires that both ESP/EAP teachers and Greek undergraduate students develop ‘inter-scientificity’ (or ‘inter-scientific competence’). The terms ‘inter-scientificity’ or ‘inter-scientific competence’ are neologisms, which were coined and introduced by the writer of the present article, first, in 2004 (Nikolarea, 2004a) and then were discussed more thoroughly in Nikolarea 2006.

Although the second compound of the term is ‘scientificity’, this term is not used in a positivistic way but rather to indicate the application of linguistic methods and principles either to overcome problems of ‘untranslatability’ of scientific or domain-specific terms or to solve the problem of linguistic asymmetries between a pair of different linguistically scientific fields – for example, English: Greek, English: French, Arabic: Greek etc. The problems of ‘untranslatability’ or linguistic asymmetries are usually created by the polysemy of scientific discourse in a glocalised context – that is, when the global meets and interacts with the local. They are also common issues in Translation Studies that should be dealt with by translation scholars and practitioners (Maginot, 2015), and solution should be found if ‘scientific’ communication between two different linguistically scientific discourses (thus, ‘inter-scientific’) can be achieved. Nevertheless, what is common practice in Translation Studies is almost totally unknown in ESP/EAP teaching at non-English (and Greek) universities, due to the fact that ESP/EAP teachers are not trained (as translations practitioners are) to recognise these issues.

Therefore, in an ESP/EAP non-English teaching context, ‘inter-scientificity’ is meant teachers and students’ ability to move with ease between at least two linguistically different scientific contexts and comprehend inter-scientific differences not only across disciplines but also across different linguistic systems and cultures, without de-contextualising scientific discourse from its respective linguistic, socio-political and cultural context(s). On the contrary, they should explore the interrelationship between scientific and general language as well as other aspects of human life and experience, at a time when interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches to socio-political, economic and environmental issues are of first priority for the students and scholars of these scientific fields. Thus, ‘inter-scientificity’ can be considered a skill acquired by those ESP/EAP teachers and Greek (or any other non-English) students who can distinguish between various readings of a polysemous terminological entity (or polyseme) and can use this polyseme accurately in at least two linguistically different scientific discourses.

\[4\] A similar claim is made by an ESP teacher of Marine Studies in Italy; see Reguzzoni 2006: 13-16.
To illustrate what ‘inter-scientificity’ means in actual use and how complex and challenging it is in ESP/EAP teaching at Greek universities, we will offer three examples of ‘inter-scientificity’ (Figures 4, 5 and 6) and three examples of ‘reverse inter-scientificity’ (Figures 8, 9 and 10), with their explication, which we have repeatedly encountered them in our ESP/EAP classes for the last eighteen years. We will also discuss briefly some of the issues involved.

3.1. Examples of ‘inter-scientificity’

In our first ESP/EAP classes in Geography, Social Anthropology and History, Cultural Technology and Communication, Sociology and Marine Sciences at the University of the Aegean some years ago, when stating that “Geography / Social Anthropology and History / Cultural Technology and Communication / Sociology / Marine Sciences is a discipline”, the students were stupefied; they could not understand what this statement meant. Although they were allowed to use general bilingual dictionaries (e.g. Stavropoulos and Hornby, 1989), which had all the Greek equivalents of the word discipline, they still could not extract the correct meaning.

At that point, we realized that we had been too presumptuous. We had assumed that the students would know the three Greek equivalents of this frequently-used English term, and that they would be able to select the correct equivalent by matching their respective meanings with the specific context in which the word occurred.

Thus, our students’ stupefaction made us aware that this frequent word in English scientific discourse is polysemic in Greek, as shown in Figure 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline: (1) πειθαρχία. (2) επιστημονικός κλάδος, τομέας γνώσεων. (3) (πειθαρχική) ποινή.</th>
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</thead>
</table>

Figure 4: Greek polysemes of discipline

We can see that in Greek there are three polysemes for the term discipline. The first polyseme signifies “behavior in accord with rules of conduct” and “a set or system of rules and regulations” (Webster’s, 1983: 409, nos: 5 and 6 respectively). The second polyseme is literally translated as “a scientific field, a branch of knowledge”. The third polyseme is literally translated as “corrective punishment” (adapted from Webster’s, 1983: 409, no. 3).

A further difficulty is that, whereas in English discipline can also be used as a verb in a specific linguistic and scientific environment, in Greek it cannot. Therefore, the term discipline proved to be a complex case characterized by multi-leveled interpretations and uses in both languages as well as by grammatical and syntactical asymmetries across languages.

Furthermore, we sensed that there were two more issues involved:

(1) The linguistic context (oral and written) did not necessarily help our students understand the meaning of discipline.

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5 Adapted from Stavropoulos and Hornby 1989: 144-145.
Despite the fact that the students consulted a general bilingual dictionary, they could not select the right meaning either because they did not know how to use a bilingual dictionary or because they only looked at the first equivalent, as presented in Figure 1.

In our classes in the Department of Geography, Social Anthropology and History, and Sociology, we also came to realize that the students of these departments usually face another difficulty; it was the term ‘fieldwork’, as shown in Figure 5. We can see that, whereas in English one single term or the lexeme ‘fieldwork’ denotes field research being conducted outside of a laboratory, library or workplace setting, in Greek two different terms, lexemes or polysemes are used; that is: (1) Επιτόπια έρευνα, which literally means “Research in situ” and denotes social scientists’ field research (Human Geographers included), such as informal interviews, direct observation, participation in the life of a group etc.; and (2) Έρευνα πεδίου, which literally means “Research in the field, out in the environment” and denotes environmental and marine scientists, biologists and other scientists (Physical Geographers included).

Fieldwork: (1) Επιτόπια έρευνα (lit. Research in situ that is used in fields of social sciences such as (human) geography, anthropology and sociology). (2) Έρευνα πεδίου (lit. research in the field, out in the environment] used in physical geography, environmental sciences, biology, marine sciences).

So, students of Social Sciences and Environmental and Marine Sciences alike, first, should know that ‘fieldwork’, when used in different linguistic and domain specific environments, has two equivalents in Greek (Figure 5, 1 and 2) and, second, they are able to identify which meaning this term acquires in the given scientific environment; that is, if ‘fieldwork’ is used either in Social Sciences (Figure 5 1) or in Environmental and Marine Sciences (Figure 5, 2). Greek students’ ability to distinguish the difference and then choose the right lexeme and transfer it to their language of instruction (i.e. Greek) appropriately is an issue of ‘inter-scientificity.’ At this point, we should mention that this issue becomes more poignant in the discipline of Geography. It is known that when geography students deal with English texts related to Human Geography, ‘fieldwork’ acquires the meaning of Figure 5, (1), whereas, when they deal with English specialist texts related to Physical Geography and the environment, ‘fieldwork’ acquires the meaning of Figure 5, (2). If Greek Geography students (or Greek geographers, in general) render ‘fieldwork’ wrongly in Greek, then they could be totally misunderstood by their Greek audience or their readership!

In different ESP class situations – one with Geography students and one with Cultural Technology and Communication students – we encountered the issue of ‘inter-scientificity’ of the term ‘graphic representation’. As we can see in Figure 6, whereas in English one single term or the lexeme ‘graphic representation’ is used in a variety of subject fields, such as Computer Science, Cartography, Mathematics, and Statistics, in Greek it is rendered in two different ways according to the scientific field it refers to. One expression is used in Computer Science (ΠΛΗΡΟΦ) and Cartography (ΧΑΡΤ) (Figure 6, 1), and another in Mathematics (ΜΑΘ) and Statistics (ΣΤΑΤ) (Figure 6, 2). So if Greek students of fields such as

Bell (2006), an ESP teacher, has come to the same conclusions.
Geography, Mathematics, Computer Science, Informatics, Statistics and Cultural Technology and Communication are unaware of these differences and use one of the Greek terms instead of the other, there may be a breakdown in communication with their instructors of their parallel classes who will either misunderstand or fail to understand what the students mean. The issue of ‘inter-scientificity’ becomes poignant for Geography students once more, since Cartography, Informatics and Statistics are some of the core subjects in the Undergraduate Studies Programmes in the Departments of Geography in Greece; that is, at the University of the Aegean (Lesvos) and Harokopio University.

3.2. Examples of ‘reverse inter-scientificity’

Having discussed that, we should mention three examples of ‘reverse inter-scientificity’ or ‘reverse inter-scientific competence’, that is, Greek terms whose English equivalents confuse Greek students, either when using them in an essay they write for our EAP classes, different Erasmus schemes, post-graduate classes in an English-speaking country, or when presenting their research in an international conference whose working language is English.

We have also observed that in EAP classes our Marine Sciences students, when presenting orally their essay in English, have repeatedly used the English lexeme ‘organ’ instead of ‘instrument’, for the Greek term ‘όργανο’, as shown in Figure 7. Thus, instead of saying ‘measurement instruments’, they usually say ‘measurement organs’ [sic], with the consequence of a total breakdown of communication! Our students’ difficulty in using the right English lexeme or polyseme lies in the fact that either they translate literally the Greek term óργανο into the English term organ, since the latter cognates from the former – and, thus to both terms can be considered faux amis or false friends, as they are called in Translation Studies (Mounin, 1974: 139)7 – or they ignore the linguistic, domain specific and cultural context of the English term, as shown in Figure 7.

Another two notorious examples of ‘reverse inter-scientificity’ that create serious problems of scientific misunderstanding and breakdown of communication between Greek Social and/or Marine Sciences students and their English-speaking counterparts are when the

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7 Faux amis or false friends are considered to be a word or expression in one language that, because it resembles one in another language, is often wrongly taken to have the same meaning.
former use wrongly the English polysemes of the Greek terms απόκλιση and θέμα, as shown in Figures 8 and 9 respectively.

There have been so many times that our Sociology students, when presenting orally their essay in English, have used ‘divergence’ for απόκλιση instead of ‘deviation’ (Figure 8), with the consequence of a total breakdown of communication, once again!

| Απόκλιση: (1) Deviation, (a) with its social and psychological meaning. (2) Difference or variability in Statistics. (3) Divergence, as used in mathematics, environmental sciences and sciences in general. |

Figure 8: English polysemes of απόκλιση

Similarly, our students of all the Departments we teach ESP and EAP – that is, in the Departments of Geography, Social Anthropology and History, Cultural Technology and Communication, Sociology and Marine Sciences – have repeatedly used the polyseme ‘theme’ for θέμα instead ‘topic’, as shown in Figure 9. One explanation of this pitfall may be that ‘theme’ is closer to θέμα, since it cognates from it or because both terms can be considered faux amis or false friends, as explained in Figure 7.

| Θέμα: (1) Topic of an essay. (2) Theme, as in ‘thematic units’. (3) Issue, as in “there is an issue here”. |

Figure 9: English polysemes of θέμα

3.3. Inter-scientificity and Independent Learning

As it is conspicuous from the above, when Greek students, ESP/EAP teachers and scientists alike are not aware of the existence of the three different English terms for the single Greek terms απόκλιση and θέμα or, even worse, they know that there are three different English terms for each of them but they do not know how and where to use them, they are led to total breakdown of communication due to the fact that the English polysemes of απόκλιση and θέμα are not interchangeable, despite the fact they look similar to a Greek user of English domain specific. Thus, during our ESP and EAP classes we try to make our students aware of the ‘inter-scientificity’ of certain English terms in Greek or the existing ‘reverse inter-scientificity’ of certain Greek terms in English.

To the best of our knowledge, this is a novel approach to ESP and EAP teaching in Greece, which helps our students become independent learners and incorporate their knowledge in papers they present in international conferences or when they follow an academic/professional career in an English-speaking country.

At this point, we should mention that, although there are references to this difficulty in ESP/ EAP (Akbarian, 2010; Nikolarea 2004a, 2004b, 2006; Reguzzoni, 2006, 13-16) in the international literature and the need of non-English (or Greek in our case) undergraduate students to participate in international conference using English as a medium of communication (Belcher, 2004; Benesch 2001), there has been discussion about neither how Greek (or non-English) university students (both undergraduate and post-graduate) can deal...
with the use of such specialised terminology and how they can incorporate it in their own academic discourse nor how an ESP/EAP teacher can handle this terminology and teach it to his/her students. The false assumption for the former case is that students always use a translator (Akbarian, 2010), something that may be partly true but hinders students from becoming independent learners. In the latter case, the assumption is that the ESP/EAP teacher will ask for a specialist’s help and solves his/her learning problem (Belcher, 2004; González, 2012). How false this assumption is we elaborated in our most recent publication (Nikolarea, 2017), where we discuss what we did when a specialist colleague in the Department of Marine Sciences claimed totally ignorant as to how “waves of translation” can be rendered in Greek. Consequently, we had to take action, carried out a thorough research and find the Greek equivalent. Through this experience, we came to realise, first, that our previous specialisation in Translation Studies came to our help, and, second, despite the fact that we are supposedly ESP/EAP teachers, we ourselves should become learners (i.e. put ourselves in our students’ shoes) and become independent learners or self-directed learners, as Bojović (2006) claims.

4. Towards New ESP/EAP Methodologies

Bearing in mind what we have discussed in Sections 1, 2 and 3, we have come to understand (1) that there must have been a paradigm shift in ESP/EAP teaching at Greek (and non-English) universities (Nikolarea, 2003b) due to the pressures that globalization and the status of English as a lingua franca have put on the local Greek scientific community and the Greek language; and (2) that we should develop new ESP/EAP methodologies to help our students become aware of the polysemy of scientific terminology and reach a solid understanding of English and Greek interdisciplinary domain-specific discourses (English ↔ Greek), so they can move with ease between these two linguistically different scientific discourses and be able to respond successfully to the new requirements of global and local scientific communities and markets as they have been emerging in the wider EU context.

These methodologies are part of a wider four-step integrated ELT approach (Nikolarea 2004a, 2004b and 2005) and can be summarized as follows:

(1) using general ELT materials (in our ESP classes);
(2) using printed or electronic ‘authentic’ specialist materials written in English (as part of modules on Research Methodology and Computer Literacy) (in our ESP classes);
(3) teaching reading techniques and strategies (as part of modules on Study Skills and Research Methodology) (in our ESP and EAP classes);
(4) teaching where to find and how to use the available bilingual (English: Greek) or multilingual specialist dictionaries in printed and in electronic form – that is, CD-ROMs, such as Odyssey®, and e-dictionaries (IATE) (as part of Research Methodology and Computer Literacy in our ESP and EAP classes (see also Nikolarea, 2003a, 2004b, 2005);
(5) teaching how to construct and maintain a personal bilingual (English: Greek) Terminological Data Bank (TDB) (in our ESP classes; see Nikolarea, 2003a, 2004a, 2004b, 2005);
(6) teaching where to find and how to use Internet-based engines of machine translation so that students may get an overall understanding of a difficult specialist text written in English, when needed (Nikolarea, 2004c, esp. 234-235);
teaching and practising how to paraphrase, rephrase and, finally, summarize highly specialised English texts in English and Modern Greek (as part of classroom activities, homework, and the final assignment), so that our students develop and enhance their bilingual communication skills (in our ESP and EAP classes);

note-taking of University lectures in English and summarizing them in English, so that our students develop and enhance their advanced listening and writing skills in English scientific discourse (in our ESP and EAP classes; see also Kneale, 2003; Nikolarea 2004b; Wallace, 2004);

essay writing (in EAP classes), including how to:
   a. carry out research in the library and/or on the Internet (Nikolarea 2005);
   b. write a synthesis of a research piece (Kneale, 2003; Wallace, 2004); and
   c. how to cite from English and Greek bibliographical references and how to write references, following international Translation standards.8

This four-step integrated ESP/EAP methodology is implemented in either in two or four 14-week semesters for 3 hours a week, depending on the Department (Nikolarea, 2004a, 2004b).

5. Development of ‘inter-scientificity’

From the discussion up to now, it becomes evident that inter-scientificity cannot be acquired unless one becomes aware of it, gets trained in it and, finally, practises it.

5.1. ESP/EAP teachers’ awareness of ‘inter-scientificity’

As we have discussed in Section 2 of the present study, ESP/EAP teachers of interdisciplinary fields - such as Geography, Cultural Technology and Communication, Social Anthropology and History, Sociology and Marine Sciences - encounter the issue of ‘inter-scientificity’, despite the fact that sometimes they may not be fully aware of it, and try to deal with it the best way they can (Mićić, 2005; Nikolarea, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c; Reguzzoni 2006). It is also evident that ESP/EAP teachers of interdisciplinary fields at Greek Universities (and possibly all ESP teachers at non-English Universities) face challenges that their counterparts at English Universities do not (Bell 2006; Nikolarea 2003b, 2004a, 2004b). These challenges derive primarily from new academic requirements and market demands that force Greek (and non-English) undergraduate students to move back and forth between global and local or glocal knowledge-based environments.

More specifically, ESP/EAP teachers of Greek (and non-English) deal with the challenge of ‘interdisciplinarity’ in a glocal context. As a consequence, not only should ESP/EAP teachers know that frequent terms assume one or more meanings according to the discipline or science in which they are used, but they should also know how these terms are rendered in the language of instruction (Greek, in our case) if they wish to make ESP/EAP teaching functional in a Greek (or a non-English) scientific environment.

8 In our EAP classes, we teach: (1) how to cite from one language to another (i.e. through paraphrasing, summarising and/or inserting a direct translation from English into Greek and vice versa); and (2) how to write and list bibliographical references when these references are from two different writing systems (i.e. English and Greek). At this point, it should be noted that what is applicable to the Greek writing system, when one writes references, is also applicable to any writing system which differs from the Latin one. For example, the Cyrillic alphabet or the Arabic and the Chinese writing system are as different from the Latin alphabet as Greek is, and so they conform to the same international Translation standards for citing and writing references.
As was discussed in Section 3, a one-to-one equivalence between the terms of two linguistically different scientific discourses is the exception rather than the rule. The rule is that there are multi-levelled asymmetries. Therefore, one of the pressures that ‘glocalisation’ puts on ESP/EAP teachers at Greek (and non-English) Universities is the demand for ‘inter-scientificity,’ a competence which can only be acquired through training.

Therefore, we claim that would-be ESP/EAP teachers, while they are undergraduate and/or post-graduate students in the English Departments at Greek (and non-English) Universities, should be trained in how to carry out research into:

(1) authentic materials written in English so as to develop very advanced analytical and combinatory skills;
(2) scientific bilingual terminology (Burdon 1988; Sager 1990), which demands:
   a. very advanced analytical skills;
   b. very advanced synthetic skills;
(3) machine translation (Nagao 1989) and more particularly Internet-based machine translation, which demands both very advanced analytical skills, comparative and contrastive skills. The use of Internet-based machine translation also requires ‘inter-scientific competence’ if the ESP/EAP teacher is to help his/her students to assess and correct the machine-translated text and use it in their assignments.

ESP/EAP teachers should therefore be trained by translation and terminology scholars (Baker 1997; Burdon 1988; Sager 1990) and lexicographers in co-operation with specialists of the specific scientific domain. Training in ‘inter-scientificity’ requires an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach, which will equip ESP/EAP teachers with the necessary skills and understanding to:

• become explorers and learners of their new learning situation and environment;
• be flexible in the use of authentic materials composed in English, since they will be able to assess what the specific classroom situation and profession demands;
• develop uncertainty and stress tolerance for unknown scientific domains and understand better their students’ anxiety and risk of failure in making an effort to acquire and develop scientific discourse(s) in two different linguistic systems; and
• be aware of their students’ general and scientific knowledge and make it a motivation factor, so that the students are willing to explore the issues and risks involved in ‘inter-scientificity’.

5.2. ESP/EAP University students’ awareness of and training in ‘inter-scientificity’

From our experience, students are initially unaware of the issue of ‘inter-scientificity’. Nevertheless, as soon as they become aware of it, they are eager to deal with it.

In Nikolarea 2003a, 2004b and 2005, we discussed in detail how three translation-based teaching methods – (1) compiling and maintaining a bilingual TDB; (2) summarizing texts in both English and Greek (or any other language of instruction); and (3) finding and using internet-based machine translation can help students reach such a level of inter-scientificity that they are able to write well-structured essays in English on topics which are related to their scientific domain and which they themselves have selected. So, in this case, ESP
overlaps with EAP teaching, and the overlapping space is a topos/locus where ‘inter-scientificity’ is developed and, eventually acquired.

Finally, the participation of students in the ESP/EAP classroom is crucial, because students’ questions, difficulties, comments and observations can make ESP/EAP teachers explore ‘new’ ways of implementing ‘traditional’ ESP/EAP teaching, and bring new ESP/EAP methodologies into being (Nikolarea, 2004b).

5.3. The educational institution

By referring to educational institution, we have in mind both the ability of an educational institution to provide teaching facilities (e.g. properly-equipped classrooms, computer laboratories) for ESP/EAP teaching and the willingness of the academic staff of a specific field and Department to guide ESP/EAP teachers. Specialists can make very good suggestions as to what bibliographical references ESP/EAP teachers should incorporate in their syllabus. They can also provide ESP/EAP teachers with reading materials, and give them information on which websites to use in their English classes.

6. Final remarks

Considering the complexity of the ‘inter-scientificity’ involved in ESP/EAP teaching at Greek (and non-English) Universities, we conclude by expressing our wish that ESP/EAP stops being Anglo-centric (Bell 2006, 35) and becomes broader in scope, bringing ESP/EAP teachers at English, Greek and other non-English Universities, specialists of a variety of specific scientific domains, translation scholars and lexicographers together so that a wide range of specialists become aware of the semantic differences and nuances of the same terms in different disciplines – that is, the existence of ‘inter-scientificity’ - and the interdependence of their disciplines and scientific discourses in an increasingly glocalized academic world.

References


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