

Assessing with an attitude: tutor assessment feedback on business students' academic writing

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Overview

- Why research assessment feedback
- Previous research
- Need for an SFL perspective to examine assessment feedback
- Research context
- Data collection tools
- Analytical tools
- Key findings
- Conclusion, implications and future

Why research assessment feedback?

Definition of assessment feedback:

Assessment feedback or feedback refers to an ongoing dialogue (written or spoken or in any medium) between the learner and their teacher in the context of assessment tasks performed by the learner to bridge the gap between the actual performance and the desired learning goal (see Wiliam, 2011).

- Assessment and feedback central to HE teaching and learning: student success, retention & progression
- Low student satisfaction of assessment and feedback in HE (HEFCE, 2014)
- Need for understanding student learning experience better

Previous studies on assessment feedback (1)

- Focus on various aspects of assessment feedback (e.g., Evans, 2013): e.g., e-assessment feedback, self-assessment feedback and peer feedback
- Exploration of what supports and hinders when providing feedback to students (Hyland, 2013)

Previous studies on assessment feedback (2)

- Studies on the effectiveness of feedback → need for recognising tutor feedback on assessment as learning-oriented and dialogic (e.g., Nicol, 2010; Shrestha & Coffin, 2012)
- Ajjawi and Boud (2015): investigation of the feedback dialogue from a socio-constructivist perspective by acknowledging the situated nature of feedback and following an interactional analysis approach
- Lack of research on the language of assessment feedback despite its high-stakes nature (cf. Hyland & Hyland, 2006)

Need for an SFL perspective to examine assessment feedback (1)

- Limited number of studies examining evaluative language used in assessment feedback
- Feedback as an occluded genre (Swales, 2004)
- Two studies of relevance: Hyland and Hyland (2006) & Starfield et al. (2015)
- Hyland and Hyland (2006): interpersonal aspects of written feedback using an interpersonal dimension (*praise/ criticise/ suggest*)
- Starfield et al. (2015): investigation of the evaluative language used in doctoral examiners' written reports by drawing on the APPRAISAL framework (Martin & White, 2005)

Need for an SFL perspective to examine assessment feedback (2)

- APPRAISAL framework: It allows us to examine interpersonal meanings construed in a text in context. In particular, it enables us to understand positive and negative evaluation embedded in the text
- Starfield et al. (2015): The system of ATTITUDE, and ENGAGEMENT in the appraisal framework applied to analyse feedback in a more fine-grained way than just a content analysis
- Indication of a potential risk of misinterpreting feedback and its negative consequences due to the highly evaluative nature of feedback

Research questions

- What kind of evaluative language is used in the assessment feedback provided to distant undergraduate business students' academic writing assessment?
- What are potential implications of such evaluative language use as revealed by an SFL perspective?

Research context

- Undergraduate English for business studies purposes module (LB160)
- Open and distance learning context: The Open University, UK
- Focus on academic reading and writing
- A large cohort of students (over 1000)
- 42 tutors
- Mainly asynchronous tutor support
- Assessment feedback meant to serve developmental purposes

Research context

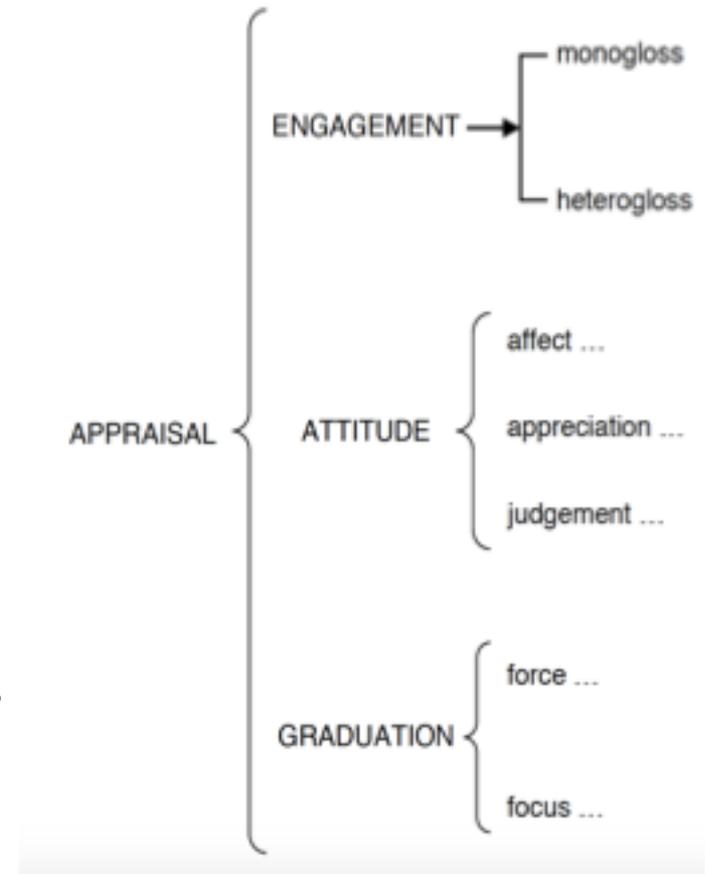
- First assignment serving formative purposes towards the second assignment
- Business case study based assignments
- First assignment a summary of a business case study and second assignment a case study analysis using a business framework/ concepts
- Marking criteria shared with students through module materials (use of source materials; text structure and development; academic style; grammar, punctuation and spelling – adapted from (Bonanno & Jones, 2007))

Data collection

- Semi-structured telephone interviews with students – 8 students (approx. 30mins each)
- Interviewee students' assignments (first and second) – 16 (not part of this talk)
- Tutor feedback summaries on each interviewee student's two assignments – 16 (11, 371 words in total)

Analytical tools (1)

- APPRAISAL framework (Hood, 2010; Martin & White, 2005) to analyse tutor feedback summaries
- The system of ATTITUDE, ENGAGEMENT and GRADUATION as developed within the APPRAISAL framework, focusing on first two
- Use of the UAM corpus tool to code tutor feedback summaries (O'Donnell, 2007)
- Thematic analysis of student interviews

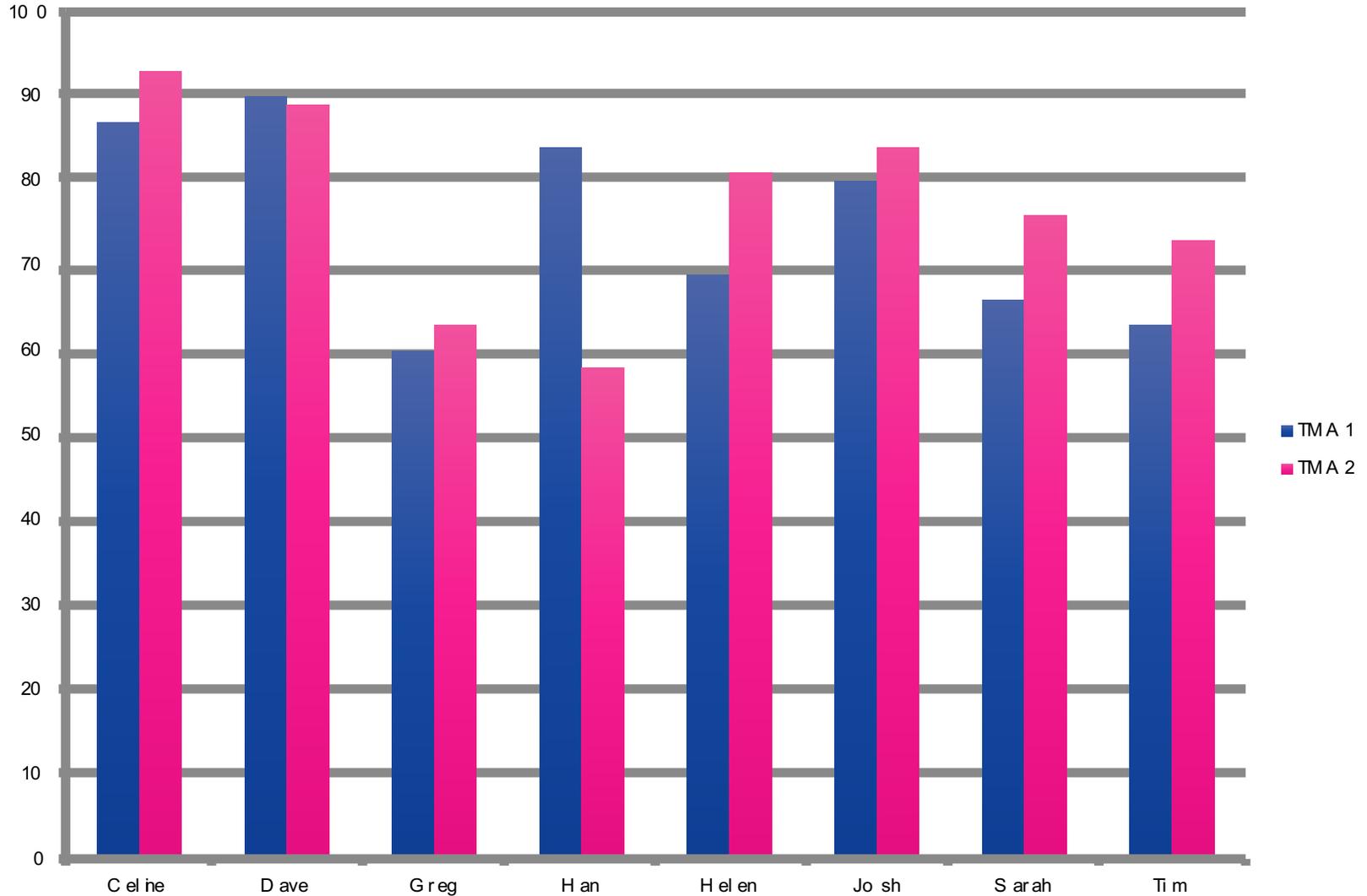


Analytical tools (2)

Categories of ATTITUDE:

- *Affect* is about language resources describing positive and negative feelings such as ‘disappointing’ and ‘satisfactory’.
- *Judgement* is concerned with linguistic resources for assessing behaviour according to normative principles such as a student writing ‘skilfully’ following academic conventions.
- *Appreciation* considers language resources construing the value of inanimate things such as the quality of a written text (e.g. ‘a well-organised structure’).

Key findings: student performance



Key findings: general features of assessment feedback summaries (1)

Length	Assignment 1	Assignment 2	Comment
Lowest wordcount	221 words	403 words	Less experienced tutors
Highest wordcount	1011 words	1833 words	More experienced tutor
Total words	4,489 words	6,882 words	
Average	561.125	860.25	

Key findings: general features of assessment feedback summaries (2)

Stages	Functions
Orientation^	Greet Acknowledge Preview: what the feedback will be about
Feedback^ (Criterion A^ Criterion B^ Criterion C^ Criterion D^ Criterion E^)	State criterion State strengths (praise) Explain problems/ weaknesses (criticise) Suggest ways of improving (exemplify) Recommend resources
[Recap^]	Summarise key points in the feedback
Recommendations^	Recommend/ Suggest ways of improving
[Acknowledgement^ + Praise^ + Suggestion^ + Encouragement]	
Closing	

Assessment feedback summary example



Hello Greg,

Well done for writing and submitting your first TMA for your new Open University module, LB160. The aim of this TMA was to write in your own words a summary of the case study text on Brompton Bicycle.

[...]

B: 12/25

Structure and development of the text: The structure and development of the text is clear and appropriate to its purpose

You have written in sentences and have grouped them together to try to form paragraphs. However, have a look at my comments on your script. Work on writing sentences which weigh and balance information. Try using links such as 'although' and 'however' which could create contrasts and suggest evaluation of the business. Work on linking information so that your paragraphs begin to create an argument. Avoid over-generalising or writing a series of statements. There needs to be sufficient detail in a summary to create a text which develops information and establishes an argument supported by evidence.

[...]

Although a reference list isn't part of the performance criteria and therefore isn't something you are assessed on for TMAs 1 and 2, it's very good practice to include one. It will form part of the marks for TMA03.

Well done for a good first TMA. Do consider the feedback. If you have any questions about your TMA or my feedback or marks, please get in touch.

Best wishes

Xxx [first name of tutor]

Key findings: appraisal of assessment feedback summaries (1)

Instances of evaluative language used in assessment feedback summaries

Appraisal Feature	Assignment 1		Assignment 2	
	N	Percent	N	Percent
Engagement	50	13.81%	98	18.60%
Attitude	251	69.34%	345	65.46%
Graduation	61	16.85%	84	15.94%
Total instances	362	100%	527	100%

Key findings: appraisal of assessment feedback summaries (2)

Attitude in assessment feedback summaries

	Assignment 1		Assignment 2	
Feature	N	Percent	N	Percent
Affect	35	13.94%	41	11.88%
Appreciation	97	38.65%	130	37.68%
Judgement	119	47.41%	174	50.43%

Key findings: appraisal of assessment feedback summaries (3)

Positive and negative attitudes in feedback summaries

Feature	Assignment 1		Assignment 2	
	N	Percent	N	Percent
Positive affect	35	13.94%	39	11.30%
Negative affect	0	0.00%	2	0.58%
Positive appreciation	64	25.50%	90	26.09%
Negative appreciation	33	13.15%	40	11.59%
Positive judgement	69	27.49%	100	28.99%
Negative judgement	48	19.12%	74	21.45%

Key findings: appraisal of assessment feedback summaries (4)

Instances of engagement in assessment feedback summaries

	Assignment 1		Assignment 2	
Feature	N	Percent	N	Percent
Monogloss	12	24.00%	29	29.59%
Heterogloss	38	76.00%	69	70.41%

Examples of evaluative language in assessment feedback summaries

Attitude types	Examples
Positive affect	<p><i>Thanks ever so much for the summary</i> I found it very interesting to read. It will provide a very good basis for your next TMA. (A1, Dave)</p> <p><i>I hope you are well and well done</i> on a good assignment. (A1, Helen)</p>
Negative affect	<p><i>I feel that your English needs a little bit of tidying up here an there</i> (see script) but as a piece of writing, this works very well, and the content is very good. (A2, Josh)</p>

Examples of evaluative language in assessment feedback summaries (1)

Attitude types	Examples
Positive appreciation	<i>Information from the source material is correct and appropriate for the task. The structure and development of the text is clear and appropriate to its purpose.</i> (A1, Celine)
Negative appreciation	<i>... but there are many generalisations and not enough detail for your reader to understand the problems facing the business.</i> (A1, Greg)
Positive judgement	<i>You have a superb grasp of how to compose a summary.</i> (A1, Dave)
Negative judgement	<i>Remember to start with the theme sentence, give a clear idea of the central theme, and go into more detail using evidence from source material, from high-level generalisations to low-level generalisations.</i> (A2, Hani)

Examples of evaluative language in assessment feedback summaries (2)

Attitude types	Examples
Monoglossic engagement	For academic writing always choose words and expressions that have a precise meaning and are not too emotive. (A1, Hani)
Heteroglossic engagement	<i>I wonder if you might add a brief introduction, too, which would help to set the scene?</i> (A2, Josh)

Key findings: student perceptions about assessment feedback

- Learning from summary feedback: make notes and use in future assignments (useability)
- Not concerned about lost marks if secured a high score
- Most tutor comments on two assignments clear and related to relevant marking criteria
- Most useful comments on paragraphing, sentence structure and presentation
- Need for personalised targeted feedback
- Preference for a summary of strengths and weaknesses at the end
- Some students unsure of the rationale behind their marks on the assignment

Some student quotes

‘She’s given me all the ... I must admit, I looked at the first one and thought ‘Oh my God, it’s all red’ but she’s explained what she’s done and why she’s done it. So ... *Because from the first one, when I got the first one in, there was a lot of different things that I needed to do for the second one and so that gave me the grounding really to then do the second one and there wasn’t quite as much red on the second one [laughing].*’ (my emphasis, Interview, Sarah)

Some student quotes

‘I guess it’s hard sometimes to know where I lost certain marks so it’s quite good to get ... in a couple of the questions it’ll say, you know, the way to do it next time consider this. In part a. I think I got twenty two out of twenty five and then it just says “Information is correct and appropriate” so *I’m not really sure where I lost those three marks*. But in the other questions, you know, it’s “Make sure you’re doing this” and *it’ll mainly explain where I lost marks*. [...] I think it’s difficult that sometimes the tutor will put in sort of a generalised what they were looking for but then not necessarily comment on whether you’ve done that or not.’ (my emphasis, Interview, Celine).

Conclusion, implications & future

- The appraisal framework provides a more fine-grained analysis of assessment feedback than a mere content analysis to understand potential impacts of evaluative language, supporting Starfield et al. (2015)
- The most widely used attitudinal evaluative language is judgement thus focusing on student behaviour rather than appreciation of student assessment texts. This can have negative consequences for student motivation (retention, progression)
- While some tutors' feedback opened dialogues with students, others were authoritative, thus closing opportunities for dialogues

Conclusion, implications & future

- Generally, students found assessment feedback useful and meaningful although some feedback was obscure to them.
- Findings indicate that tutors need to be aware of how they use evaluative language in their assessment feedback
- Professional development for tutors in writing assessment feedback may minimise negative consequences.
- Given the high-stakes nature of assessment feedback in HE, further study of this nature is needed

Thank you!
Any questions?

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