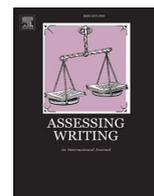


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## Examining evaluative language used in assessment feedback on business students' academic writing

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### ABSTRACT

Written assessment feedback in higher education has been examined from different perspectives. However, there is limited empirical evidence of how tutors use language to provide assessment feedback on students' assessed academic writing. By deploying the rarely used *Appraisal framework* in Systemic Functional Linguistics, this innovative study examined the use of evaluative language by tutors in feedback on undergraduate business students' academic writing in two assignments at a distance university. The data consisted of 16 tutor assessment feedback summaries on eight students' written assignments and interviews with those students. The Appraisal system of *Attitude (Judgement, Appreciation and Affect)* was used to analyse the evaluative language of the summaries. The analysis of student interviews provided insights into their perceptions of tutor feedback, complementing the linguistic analysis. The findings suggest that tutors' evaluative language was primarily used to *judge* students rather than to *appreciate* the assignment, and show their emotional reactions, potentially owing to the distance learning context. Additionally, while most of the feedback was perceived positively, students found certain types of tutor feedback less helpful. The paper has implications for moving assessment feedback research forward through applying the Appraisal framework, improving assessment strategies and tutor formative feedback practices in writing assessment.

### 1. Introduction

It has widely been recognised that feedback on assessment should be learning-oriented. In recent years, there has been a call for making assessment feedback more dialogic and responsive to student needs as seen in recent studies (Ajjawi & Boud, 2017; Carless & Boud, 2018; Fernando, 2020; Nicol, 2010; Shrestha & Coffin, 2012; Shrestha, 2020; Wang & Lee, 2021). This seems to be driven by changing views of assessment, teaching and learning, and student dissatisfaction with existing assessment feedback practices in higher education (HE). For example, UK National Student Survey results regarding assessment and feedback have constantly shown a low student rating since 2005 (HEFCE, 2014; Office for Students, 2020). Language plays a pivotal role in how students make sense of assessment feedback. However, there has been sparse research on the use of evaluative language in assessment feedback despite its inherent evaluative nature.

The work within the article was specifically designed to contribute to the field of writing assessment feedback by arguing that the

*Abbreviations:* HE, Higher Education; SFL, Systemic Functional Linguistics; TMA, Tutor Marked Assignment.

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role of evaluative language in assessment feedback is significant and a linguistic analysis approach complements other analytical approaches such as content analysis (e.g., Glover & Brown, 2006; Kim & Kim, 2017; Walker, 2009) and interactional analysis (Ajajwi & Boud, 2017, 2018) to address the methodological imbalance in feedback research highlighted in a recent review (Mao & Lee, 2020) and understand assessment feedback better. In this regard, it reports on an initial investigation carried out at a UK distance learning university that employed the discourse semantic system called *Appraisal* (Martin & White, 2005), also known as language of evaluation, developed within Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) to analyse assessment feedback to understand feedback writing practices and their potential effects on undergraduate business students in distance education, the first study of its kind in distance learning. The study, by using a linguistic framework, examines the evaluative language of the tutor feedback in relation to student perceptions of assessment feedback which is rare in the literature as most studies tend to consider the content analysis of the feedback and perceptions of students and teachers (e.g., Hyland, 2013a, 2013b; Niu, Shan, & You, 2021; Walker, 2009). Thus, this paper moves assessment feedback research beyond a traditional content analysis to a fine-grained linguistic analysis of assessment feedback to scrutinise evaluative language (e.g., 'You didn't identify any key concepts') which can have serious consequences for students. It proposes how assessment feedback can be made more meaningful to students. The article addresses three research questions: (1) *What generic features does a feedback summary, as a genre, have?* (2) *What is the nature of the evaluative language used in tutor assessment feedback on assignments as shown by a linguistic analysis?* and (3) *What are the distance business students' perceptions about the evaluative nature of assessment feedback?*

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Research on assessment feedback in higher education

Within HE, there is a large body of research conducted on writing assessment feedback. Most of these studies have, however, tended to focus on student and tutor perceptions about assessment and feedback in HE as demonstrated by many articles published (e.g., Dawson et al., 2019; Hernández, 2012; Niu et al., 2021; Zhang, 2020). This journal (*Assessing Writing*) has published a large number of papers on *feedback* and *academic writing*. A search by using these two terms as key words resulted in 97 research articles published in the journal between 2016 and 2021, indicating an ongoing interest in the topic. A detailed examination of these papers showed that most of these papers were related to English as a foreign language (EFL) or English as a second language (L2/ ESL) research contexts (Ene & Kosobucki, 2016; Mujtaba, Reynolds, Parkash, & Singh, 2021; Niu et al., 2021; Yu, Zheng, Jiang, Liu, & Zheng, 2021). Employing different research methods, these studies have examined various aspects of feedback practices including written corrective feedback (Ene & Kosobucki, 2016), feedback effectiveness (Kim & Kim, 2017), peer feedback (Dressler, Chu, Crossman, & Hilman, 2019), student feedback literacy (Yu & Liu, 2021), teacher emotion (Yu et al., 2021) and automated feedback (Zhang, 2020) in EFL and/ or L2 contexts. Some studies have investigated feedback practices in English dominant (non-ESL/L2) HE contexts like the UK (Fernando, 2018).

In the UK HE, student satisfaction regarding assessment and feedback compared to other aspects of HE academic support continues to be lower (e.g., see Office for Students, 2020). It is also widely acknowledged the 'high stakes' nature of assessment which is normally in the form of students' academic writing performance (Lillis & Scott, 2007). Studies have shown that student engagement with assessment feedback may depend on a number of factors such as contextual and personal (e.g., affective reactions) surrounding the assessment feedback given and the feedback itself (e.g., Yu, Jiang, & Zhou, 2020; Zhang & Hyland, 2018). For instance, students may not enact feedback due to an inability to understand academic discourse (Lea & Street, 1998), lack of motivation or negative affective responses to feedback (Zhang & Hyland, 2018; Zhang, 2020), lack of sufficient or good quality feedback (Hounsell, McCune, Hounsell, & Litjens, 2008), feedback not being 'usable' (Walker, 2009) and students' feedback literacy (Carless & Boud, 2018; Yu & Liu, 2021). The cited studies indicate that academics in HE need to engage with students more meaningfully through feedback dialogues thereby helping students with enhancing their learning. For a comprehensive review of studies on assessment feedback in HE, interested readers are referred to Evans (2013) and for corrective written feedback, see Mao and Lee (2020).

The value of tutor feedback regarding writing assessment has widely been recognised in higher education. A number of previous studies such as Hyland (2013b), and Walker (2009) have indicated that students appreciate feedback if it is given in the 'right' amount (i.e., not too lengthy or too short), accessible language, and in a timely manner. Many previous studies have tended to focus on perceptions of students and tutors regarding formative feedback through surveys and interviews supplemented by a content analysis of tutor feedback (e.g., Mao & Lee, 2020; Niu et al., 2021). Such studies demonstrate students' and teachers' attitudes towards and perceptions about feedback and thus are important. However, they do not provide sufficient information about how the *evaluative language* is deployed in feedback which may offer us new insights into assessment feedback practices. More recently, some studies (e.g., Pitt & Norton, 2017; Yu & Liu, 2021) have associated feedback uptake with student emotions, potentially linked with language use, as suggested in Evans (2013).

A recent critical review of research on feedback in HE published between 2000 and 2012 showed that certain aspects of feedback have received attention while others appear to have been overlooked (Evans, 2013). According to this review, research on feedback has focused on aspects such as student and teacher perceptions, e-assessment feedback, self-assessment feedback, peer feedback and the role of affect. However, Evans argues that there is, inter alia, a dearth of knowledge about the feedback dialogue or exchange between an individual student and their teacher, the social context of feedback and the interaction between students and their teachers about assessment feedback. Although this paper is not about feedback dialogue, the use of language plays a pivotal role in all this and yet it has received little attention in the literature (Starfield et al., 2017).

Within the context of distance education (present study context), a few studies on feedback have already been carried out. An

earlier study by [Glover and Brown \(2006\)](#) conducted a content analysis of feedback and examined biosciences and physical sciences students' and tutors' perceptions about feedback. They found that the feedback was about past learning and focused on justifying grades. A few years later, [Walker \(2009\)](#) carried out a study with undergraduate Technology students. It aimed to explore how much feedback is 'usable' (i.e., useful) for students by seeking students' views in addition to the analysis of their tutors' feedback comments. This study suggested that if the feedback is 'usable', students make use of it in their future assignments although this will rely on the student recognising the feedback as such. Walker also analysed tutor feedback comments using several categories such as 'content' and 'skills development'. However, this study and the previous one did not analyse the assessment feedback linguistically to scrutinise the evaluative language which could have revealed tutor attitudes towards the assignment text and/ or the student. Therefore, there is a need for examining tutor feedback linguistically to understand the use of evaluative language which may shed new light on feedback rather than solely relying on the content analysis, thus contributing to the research on writing assessment feedback and responding creatively to [Mao and Lee's \(2020\)](#) call for more diverse research methods with classroom relevance.

## 2.2. Linguistic perspectives on assessment feedback

The published literature indicates that studies that employ linguistic perspectives on written feedback in HE are sparse despite the role of language in it ([Starfield et al., 2017](#)). To my knowledge, the foundational study in this area is by [Hyland and Hyland \(2001\)](#) on English as a second language students' writing in an English language proficiency course. They examined interpersonal aspects of feedback by drawing on the pragmatic functions of praise, criticism and suggestion. These functions were further classified by each function being about: ideas, language form, academic concerns, process and general (p. 194). Additionally, they examined teacher think-aloud protocols and interview data to validate textual data. The authors argued that writing teachers used mitigation strategies such as hedging to soften their criticism and suggestions which then potentially led to incomprehension and miscommunication of feedback due to indirectness.

Another linguistic perspective on assessment feedback, albeit extremely scarce, is examining written feedback as a genre, following Swales' [Swales' \(1990\)](#) genre move analysis. There appear to be only two published studies to date and thus important to mention them. The first pioneering study ([Mirador, 2000](#)) attempted to identify functional moves in feedback texts for MA Education students. In total, 12 moves such as General Impression, Suggesting Improvement and Highlighting Strengths including their linguistic forms were identified. The second study ([Yelland, 2011](#)) which examined assessment feedback texts for undergraduate English studies students expanded Mirador's by refining some moves, especially treating Suggesting Improvement, Juxtaposition, Positivising and Probing as steps for the Managing Negative Comment move. Both studies highlight the importance of understanding genre moves and language use in assessment feedback. Due to the lack of such studies, our knowledgebase is limited and thus more studies are warranted.

In addition to the above studies, there are two studies which specifically employed an established linguistic framework to analyse assessment feedback and thus are methodologically directly relevant to the current study: [Starfield et al. \(2015\)](#) and [Starfield et al. \(2017\)](#). Both these studies investigated PhD examiners' comments on PhD theses. They both drew on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to analyse the data, hence the methodological relevance to the current study (for explanation of SFL, see 3.2). The first study ([Starfield et al., 2015](#)) employed the Appraisal framework ([Martin & White, 2005](#)) to examine the evaluative language used in the examiners' reports (see [Section 3.2](#) for Appraisal framework). The authors state that they expanded the framework by adding two more 'delicate' options, *covert judgement* and *embedded judgement* (pp. 143–44). They argue that although the examiners' reports focused on the *appreciation* of the theses, they also *judged* the candidate. The second study ([Starfield et al., 2017](#)) appears to have examined the same set of data (i.e., PhD examiners' reports) to consider the discourse of evaluation and instruction. However, in this study, the authors employ a transitivity analysis drawing on Halliday's SFL ([Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014](#)) to examine verb groups and the roles adopted by examiners in the reports. They argue that it can be frustrating to the PhD candidates and their supervisors due to the co-presence of multiple roles of the examiner (e.g., evaluator, instructor) in the report when they want to interpret an examiner comment ([Starfield et al., 2017](#), p. 63). Given the apparent lack of research on assessment feedback from linguistic perspectives, [Starfield et al. \(2017\)](#) call for more research on it from a number of perspectives to which the current paper aims to respond.

In summary, there are only a few studies which have examined assessment feedback linguistically. Among those which did, only two studies ([Starfield et al., 2015, 2017](#)) used a discourse semantic system (i.e., SFL). However, they were about PhD examiners' reports rather than undergraduate writing assessment feedback and they did not explore through interviews what sense the candidates made of the reports. Therefore, this study was designed to fill this gap by linguistically examining written feedback given to undergraduate business students in distance education, complemented by the student interview data.

## 3. Data collection context

This study investigated the language of written assessment feedback within a first-year undergraduate module taught at The Open University (OU) in the UK. All students study part-time in the OU. The module is recommended for students studying or planning to study business studies at the university. The module is designed to enhance academic reading and writing skills that students will need for undergraduate business studies. The assignment tasks aim to reflect the text types or genres that appear in business studies assignments. There are four Tutor Marked Assignments (TMAs), targeting different text types: summary of a case study (TMA1), case study analysis (TMA2), discussion essay (TMA3) and workplace report (TMA4). The current study examined the assessment feedback on TMA1 and TMA2 only because (1) the first two assignments are crucial points for student retention in distance education ([Chetwynd & Dobbyn, 2011](#)) and (2) the feedback language (i.e., meaningfulness) from the outset can play a deciding role in student engagement

in distance learning (Gaytan, 2015) and thus important to investigate it. Tutors are explicitly asked to provide formative feedback on TMA1 to support with TMA2 and students are asked to consider TMA1 feedback when completing TMA2 (see Appendix A).

The assignment tasks used in TMA1 and TMA2 are given in Appendix A to contextualise the study. They are central to what students wrote and how their tutors provided assessment feedback on their written assignments in this study.

The module includes a set of five marking criteria that are explained to students explicitly. The tutors are asked to follow these criteria when they mark and provide feedback on academic writing to their students. The marking criteria, adapted from Bonanno and Jones (2007), are:

1. Use of source materials.
2. Structure and development of text.
3. Academic writing style.
4. Grammatical correctness.
5. Qualities of presentation.

### 3.1. Data collection methods

Two types of data were collected in order to investigate tutor feedback on students' assessed academic writing over seven weeks. The data consisted of written tutor assessment feedback summaries<sup>1</sup> (N = 16) in an authentic context, and student interviews (N = 8). This study fully complies with the institution's human research ethics guidelines.

#### 3.1.1. Tutor assessment feedback summary

Written tutor feedback summaries (see sample in Appendix B) were collected from eight students who volunteered to be interviewed (see Section 3.1.2). They were written by eight tutors (one per student), representing 38 % of the total number of tutors (21) on the course. Feedback summaries on each student's two assignments were collected to understand the language of feedback. In total, 16 tutor feedback summaries were collected out of which, eight were from TMA1 and eight from TMA2.

#### 3.1.2. Student interviews

To complement the linguistic analysis of the feedback, semi-structured interviews were conducted in English with eight students who voluntarily contributed their two assignments with assessment feedback for the study. Among them, five were males and three females. Their age ranged from 25 to 55 at the time and all were British nationals except one (Spanish). They were all in employment and studying towards a business degree.

With hindsight, tutor interviews on the feedback language could have provided further insights into the feedback summary. However, at the data collection time the focus was on how students made meaning of the evaluative nature of feedback rather than what tutors thought. Additionally, research shows that it is more important to understand students' understanding and interpretation of assessment feedback than tutors' intentions of feedback in student-centred learning (Sadler, 2010, p. 537).

The interviews provided in-depth information regarding students' understanding of the evaluative nature of assessment feedback. The semi-structured interview included these questions: *How much do you understand written tutor feedback in general? What do you do with the tutor feedback? How useful did you find the tutor feedback given on TMA1? To what extent did it help you to prepare for your eTMA2? Let's look at your feedback summary form. Your tutor says ... do you understand what this means?*

Recorded telephone interviews with these students were conducted by an independent research assistant. Each of the interviews lasted about 30 min in average and each participant was offered a £10 book voucher in recognition of the time they gave for the interview. All recorded interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriber and checked by the author for accuracy.

### 3.2. Data analysis

Written feedback summaries were linguistically analysed. They were analysed by employing a framework called *Appraisal framework*, developed by Martin and White (2005) as a system of interpersonal meanings in *Systemic Functional Linguistics* (SFL) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Given the inevitability of evaluative language use in assessment feedback, it is crucial to examine how the assessor/ tutor communicates their evaluation to the student.

*Appraisal framework* is concerned with linguistic resources used to construe interpersonal meanings in a text. This framework was chosen for use here as it lends itself to examining evaluative language (e.g., *excellent, poor*) which the assessment feedback naturally contains. It is about positive and negative evaluation of people, their behaviour and things in social contexts thus indicating a writer's attitudes, judgements and openness towards alternative views. There are three domains of the *Appraisal framework* (see Fig. 1), namely Attitude,<sup>2</sup> Engagement and Graduation. Attitude is about evaluating feelings, behaviours and things or phenomena. Engagement looks at resources that enable the writer to take value positions by introducing other voices, and perspectives (e.g., citing someone, denying

<sup>1</sup> A feedback summary refers to the written summary of comments on the assignment following the marking criteria.

<sup>2</sup> Functional labels for terms within the Appraisal framework are written with initial capitals following the SFL conventions (e.g., see Coffin & Donohue, 2014).

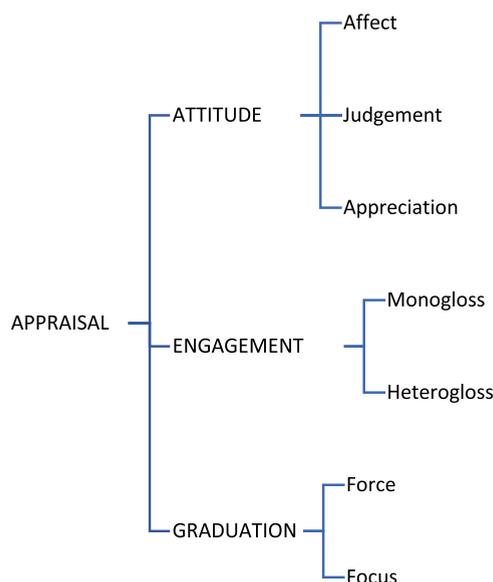


Fig. 1. Model of Appraisal framework adapted from Martin and Rose (2007).

others' views) and Graduation is concerned with the gradability of meanings by amplifying or blurring them (Martin & White, 2005). Keeping in view of the space and its high occurrence (see Table 1), this article focuses on the domain of Attitude in assessment feedback. For a detailed treatment of the SFL *Appraisal framework*, interested readers are referred to Martin and White (2005) and Hood (2010).

According to Martin and White (2005), *Attitude* has three sub-categories: *Affect*, *Judgement* and *Appreciation*. *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. Finally, *Appreciation* considers language resources construing the value of inanimate things such as the quality of a written text (e.g. 'a well-organised structure'). Attitude language can be both positive and negative in all sub-categories.

This framework has been applied to different fields. For example, it has been used to examine emotions (e.g., Bednarek, 2008), research writing (e.g., Hood, 2010) and student written reflective assignments (e.g., Szenes & Tilakaratna, 2021) but rarely in the qualitative analysis of assessment feedback (cf. Hyland & Hyland, 2001). To date, this framework has only been used to examine PhD examiner feedback reports as reviewed earlier (see Starfield et al., 2015).

The *Appraisal framework* is flexible and has further sub-categories under each domain (e.g., Judgement: normality, capacity, tenacity, veracity and propriety; for details, see Martin & White, 2005). This paper aims to examine various sub-categories of Attitude as revealed in the feedback summary data.

Attitude can be *inscribed* where the evaluative language is explicitly positive or negative (e.g., appropriate, inappropriate sentence). It can also be *invoked* or indirect in which case the surrounding textual context contributes to the evaluation position (e.g., Remember to start with the theme sentence). In this paper, the coding convention in Martin and White (2005) is followed. All inscribed Attitude is in **bold**. Their valence (positive or negative charging) is coded as '+ ve' for positive and '- ve' for negative. The appraised is either the student or the assignment and evaluation sources are mainly tutors themselves. The appraised is coded in *italics*.

As in Starfield et al. (2015), this paper moves the application of the Appraisal framework beyond lexis (word level), unlike in Martin and White (2005), to phrases, clauses and sentences to situate the evaluative language in a wider assessment feedback context. All feedback summaries were coded and recoded by applying the framework using the freely available UAM Corpus tool (version 3.2) (O'Donnell, 2007), specifically designed to conduct an SFL analysis. Each feedback summary was entered as a text file and parsed at the sentence level to maintain the context of evaluative language use. It should also be acknowledged that identifying or coding 'expressions of Appraisal in text is a complex and highly subjective task' (Fuoli, 2018, p. 230). There were instances which were tricky and could be coded more than one category. For example, 'it is **good to see that you have caught up with everything and achieved a very good mark**' could be Affect:satisfaction [+] and Judgement:capacity [+]. These issues were addressed by recoding the data with some double-coding and coding 30 % of feedback summaries by an independent SFL researcher which resulted in more than 95 % match.

In addition to the Appraisal analysis, feedback summaries were analysed as a *genre* from an SFL perspective as suggested in Starfield et al. (2017). In SFL, genre is defined as a 'staged goal-oriented social process' (Martin & Rose, 2008, p. 6). Following Swales (2004), a feedback summary can be called an *occluded genre*, a genre that is hidden and out of sight to all but only a few privileged and experts, because it is quite private and has an evaluative function known to 'experts' like tutors in this case. As a genre, it follows *stages* to achieve the *goal* of communicating feedback in a social context (i.e., communication between tutor and their students). The recurring stages were identified to see the dominant pattern. By analysing this underexplored genre, this paper will show the typical stages of

**Table 1**  
Instances of evaluative language used in tutor feedback.

Appraisal feature	TMA1		TMA2	
	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

feedback summaries as adopted by the tutors in the current study.

In order to complement the linguistic analysis of the feedback summaries, the interview data were examined for emerging themes about what meanings students made about assessment feedback, broadly following Braun and Clarke (2006). Initially, the author read all interview transcripts and highlighted the relevant parts of each transcript in relation to the key words in the interview questions (e. g., ‘understanding written feedback’, ‘its usefulness’, ‘relevance to subsequent assignment’). Next, using NVivo 11 (QSR, 2017), transcripts were coded to identify themes based on their ‘keyness’ in relation to the research question rather than their frequency. This means a deductive method (top down) was used for this purpose to understand students’ meaning-making of assessment feedback.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Generic features of assessment feedback summaries

An assessment feedback summary as a genre has rarely been examined in the literature as noted earlier. This means we need more studies to understand their generic features especially owing to their *occluded* and private nature (following Swales, 2004). Therefore, to address Research Question 1, all feedback summaries were examined for their generic features, specifically genre stages.

The analysed feedback summaries for each assignment had various lengths which affected the number of genre stages in them. Some of them were much longer than others. For example, the shortest feedback summary was of 221 words for TMA1 while the longest one had 403 words on the same assignment. The longer feedback summaries had higher number of stages than those which were shorter. This variation of the feedback length could potentially have different effects on students’ experience of processing the feedback. Some students, for instance, might not engage with a long feedback summary or the feedback may be too short to explain what the student in question needed to do to improve the next assignment.

All of the feedback summaries consisted of several stages as in other genres such as a problem- solution report. For example, a feedback summary may begin with a Greeting and end with a Signature (Closing) (see Appendix B for an example feedback summary). As shown in Table 2, a typical pattern of genre stages found in all feedback summaries was as below and they can be seen as *obligatory* stages:

#### 4.1.1. Orientation^ Feedback^ Recommendations^ Closing

These ‘obligatory’ and additional stages are exemplified in the example in Appendix B. Each feedback summary began with Orientation that included *greeting*, *acknowledgement* and *preview*. Then it provided Feedback framed by the five marking criteria. Each Feedback stage stated the criterion, highlighted strengths, pointed out problems or weaknesses and made suggestions. The Recommendation stage which suggested how to improve the assignment was either interweaved with the Feedback stage (see Appendix B) or presented separately after it. Finally, the feedback summary had a Closing stage which included a *polite ending* and the tutor’s *signature*. While all feedback summaries had these ‘obligatory’ stages, some longer summaries also contained additional stages such as Recap (summarising key points) and Reminder for next assignment as presented in Table 2. It is not, however, clear why some tutors had fewer or more stages than others, which could have been explored through tutor interviews.

### 4.2. Linguistic appraisal of tutor feedback summaries

The linguistic analysis drew on the SFL-based *Appraisal framework* (Martin & White, 2005) to examine the evaluative language used by tutors in their feedback summaries on student assignments. This framework allowed the researcher to scrutinise the evaluative language in the feedback linguistically which has traditionally been limited to content analysis (see, Mao & Lee, 2020). Drawing on the *Appraisal framework*, the evaluative language found in the feedback was examined through the system of *Attitude*, which was the most prevalent in the data (see Table 1). The reason for Attitude having the highest instances appears to be feedback being emotional (Forsythe & Johnson, 2017; Yu & Liu, 2021; Yu & Zheng, 2021) and it being an appraisal of people’s behaviour and performance.

#### 4.2.1. Assessing with an attitude

Attitude was analysed by considering whether it was positive or negative regarding tutors’ emotional reactions (Affect), judgement of students’ writing behaviour (Judgement) and evaluation of written performance (Appreciation). Table 3 gives a summary of findings regarding Attitude language.

The marking criteria used for assessment of the two assignments, mentioned earlier, suggest that evaluation in feedback is concerned with the Appreciation of the written assignment, similar to Starfield et al.’s (2015) study. The evaluation should have focused

**Table 2**

Stages of the summary feedback genre and functions found in TMA 1 and TMA2 feedback summaries.

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

**Table 3**

Summary: attitude in feedback summaries.

Attitude types	TMA1		TMA2	
	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
<b>Total</b>	<b>251</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>345</b>	<b>100</b>

on the use of *source materials*, *text organisation*, *academic writing style*, *grammatical accuracy* and *presentation*. However, in both the assignments as shown in Table 4, about one half of the Attitude language instances in the feedback concentrated on the students' writing behaviour (Judgement) rather than the assignment text (Appreciation). This is also the case in most of the tutor feedback when the feedback given to each student is examined as presented in Figs. 2 and 3.

A further analysis of the three sub-categories of Attitude revealed that most of the Attitude language instances were positive as presented in Table 4. One reason for this may be due to the nature of distance education in which assessment feedback is treated as a form of teaching and is traditionally expected to be positive (e.g., see Chetwynd & Dobbyn, 2011). It is also noticeable that there was no instance of negative Affect language in the first assignment which is probably for building rapport initially with the distance learning students.

A more nuanced qualitative analysis of Judgement, Appreciation and Affect is presented in the next few sections. Each sub-system was applied to the assessment feedback data drawing on the system network (Fig. 4) as applicable.

#### 4.2.2. Judgement: valuation of student writing behaviours

The assessment feedback demonstrated that tutors appeared to have passed judgement on students' writing behaviours being 'socially acceptable or unacceptable' and 'legal or illegal' in assignment writing despite its purpose to examine the quality of the assignment. This kind of language may have resulted from the tutor trying to address the student directly. Judgement is not related to the course marking criteria. For this reason, Starfield et al. (2015, p. 137) call it 'unofficial evaluations'. Judgement language was used to indicate: *Social esteem* (Tenacity, Normality, Capacity) and *Social sanction* (Veracity and Propriety) (Martin & White, 2005).

*Judgement:tenacity*<sup>3</sup> is concerned with the student's thoroughness and carefulness about writing, and following guidelines such as double line spacing, adding citations and reference list. The tutors evaluate this behaviour in examples (1)–(4).

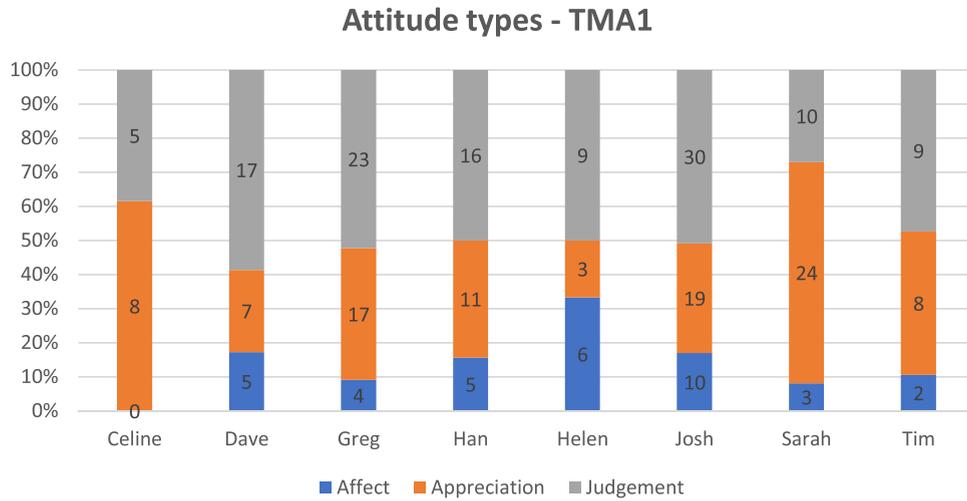
- 1) **Make sure you are pulling together the concepts that support one another.** [– ve Judgement:tenacity]
- 2) **Please provide a word count.** [– ve Judgement:tenacity].
- 3) **You have also added a detailed reference list** to your work. [+ ve Judgement:tenacity].
- 4) **Please refer to the guidelines** for TMA and academic presentation. [– ve Judgement:tenacity].

*Judgement:normality* is about students' unusual or special behaviour in writing (5), and using specialised vocabulary and use of key concepts (6), (7). The examples below indicate students having or not having these writing behaviours. Unlike in Starfield et al. (2015), there were many instances of Judgement:normality in the data.

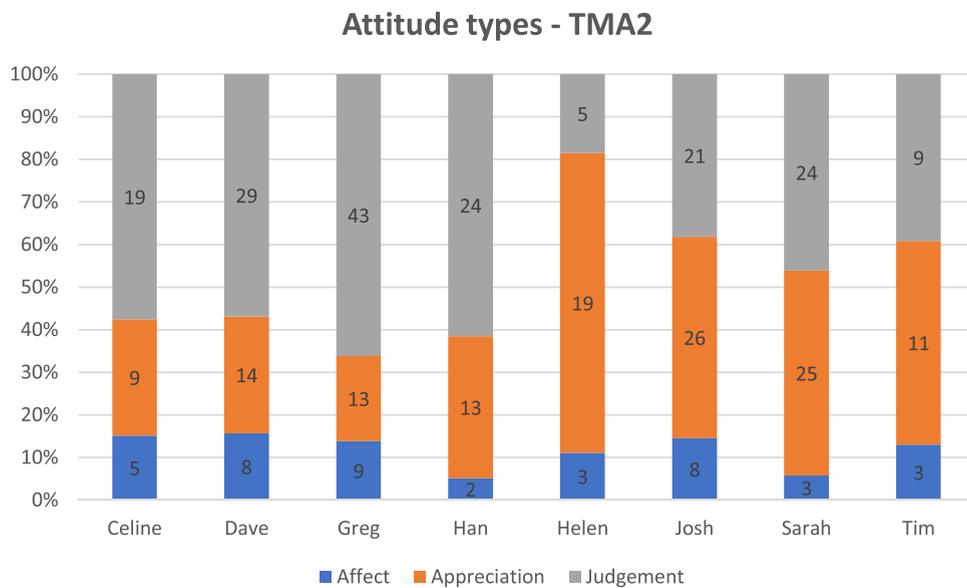
<sup>3</sup> I have used the sign (: ) between two choices to show delicacy where the second choice is more delicate, following Starfield et al. (2015).

**Table 4**  
Positive and negative attitudes in feedback.

Attitude types	TMA1		TMA2	
	N	Percent (%)	N	Percent (%)
Positive affect	37	15.19	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
Total	251	100	345	100



**Fig. 2.** Attitude types in TMA1 assessment feedback.



**Fig. 3.** Attitude types in TMA2 assessment feedback.

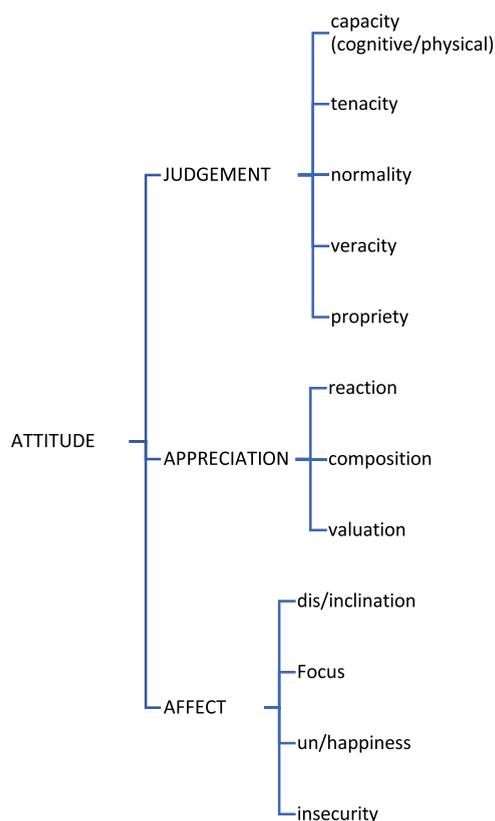


Fig. 4. Attitude system applied in this study.

- 5) **You have made a promising attempt to summarise the Brompton text.** [+ ve Judgement:normality].
- 6) **You have used your own words most of the time, with just one or two examples of words and phrases taken from the text.** [+ ve Judgement:normality].
- 7) **You have effectively organised almost all of the paragraphs using high-level generalisations and key concepts.** [+ ve Judgement:normality].

*Judgement:capacity* is about students' cognitive capacity in understanding concepts/writing, and physical capacity such as underlining key concepts, and transferring information. The occurrence of this type was high in the feedback summary. The focus was mostly on the student's cognitive ability as in (8)–(10) indicated by verbs and nouns referring to mental abilities. On rare occasions, the tutor evaluated their students' physical ability as in (11).

- 8) **You use an excellent range of academic terminology as well as hedging.** [+ ve Judgement:capacity:cognitive].
- 9) **However, you need to expand the argument a little more by including some of the marketing opportunities** [– ve Judgement:capacity:cognitive]
- 10) **You have acquired the skills of creating key concepts** from Session 1. [+ ve Judgement:capacity:cognitive].
- 11) **You have written in sentences and have grouped them together to try to form paragraphs.** [+ ve Judgement:capacity:physical].

*Judgement:veracity* is concerned with students making (in)valid arguments in writing and providing (in)accurate information in the assignment. Although the validity of the argument is to do with the assignment text, the tutors commented on student behaviours of doing so as illustrated by (12), (13). Example (14) shows both Judgement:veracity and Judgement:capacity:propriety in terms of the information accuracy. It also highlights the challenge of identifying the sub-categories within Judgement.

- 12) **Avoid over-generalising** [– ve Judgement:veracity] or **writing a series of statements.** [– ve Judgement:veracity].
- 13) **You might want to work on making your argument clearer by using conditional tenses and modal verbs and by linking your sentences.** [– ve Judgement:veracity].
- 14) **Do remember to include an accurate reference list** in the next TMA and to **use the Harvard referencing system.** [– ve Judgement:veracity/ propriety].

*Judgement:propriety*, the final Judgement sub-category, is about students' (in)correct interpretation of case study or information and how they use citations with regard to the academic conduct. The assignment required students to interpret the case study by using a business framework. The accuracy of this interpretation was evaluated as in (15). The evaluation also included the academic conduct of the students as illustrated by the term *plagiarism* in (16). These could lead to serious consequences for students.

- 15) **Try to avoid making personal judgements or comments, especially ones which aren't stated in the original text**, such as 'A cost analysis for new sponsorships for bike racing events should be evaluated that would raise the product profile.' [- ve Judgement:propriety].
- 16) You have **integrated information** from the source material, **but with some plagiarism**. [+ /- ve Judgement:propriety].

#### 4.2.3. *Appreciation: valuation of assignment*

Within this category, the *appraised* is the text or assignment and occasionally the dummy subject 'it'. This means the assessment feedback evaluated the quality of the assignment as 'officially' expected unlike the Judgement language. Appreciation also relates to the five course marking criteria mentioned in Section 3. The analysis showed three broad sub-categories of Appreciation in the assessment feedback: Reaction, Composition and Valuation. They have further categories as illustrated and explained below. They include the extended category *Standard* in Valuation by Starfield et al. (2015) which had the highest occurrences in the Valuation category. As in their study, there was no instance of Valuation:normality in the data.

*Appreciation:valuation:standard* is about the quality of the assignment content. Standard was related to assignment writing standards - double-spacing, personal identifier, presentation of assignment, grammar and spelling. Feedback on *Grammatical correctness* and *Presentation* in the marking criteria falls in this category. In the examples, the comments focused on the standard of grammar, academic English (17), paragraph structure (18), spelling (19) and the presentation of the assignment (20).

- 17) **The text is grammatically accurate as written academic English**. [+ ve Appreciation:valuation:standard].
- 18) **Ideally, paragraphs should have a minimum of three or four sentences**. [- ve Appreciation:valuation:standard].
- 19) **Your spelling is mainly accurate**. [+ ve Appreciation:valuation:standard]
- 20) **It's good practice to provide a cover page with relevant details**. [- ve Appreciation:valuation:standard].

*Appreciation:composition:balance* is concerned with *hanging together*. In this paper, it refers to the arrangement of information (organisation of text and information), logic, coherence, and paragraphing in the assignment (marking criterion *Structure and development of text*). The tutor is looking for how well the assignment text is developed and the information connected. The feedback summaries evaluated the organisation of information in the assignment, specifically regarding text development (21), (22), paragraph connections (23) and logical flow (24).

- 21) **Your paragraphs begin with high level generalisations, as recommended** in pp. 21–24 of Book 1. [+ ve Appreciation:composition:balance/standard].
- 22) **The information is mostly linked and connected, with some inconsistencies**. [± ve Appreciation:composition:balance].
- 23) **the argument 'flows' well from one paragraph to the other**. [±ve Appreciation:composition:balance].
- 24) **The structure appears to follow a logical enough sequence**. [+ve Appreciation:composition:balance]

*Appreciation:composition:complexity* is about easiness to follow a text. It is concerned with clarity, simplicity, detail and comprehensibility of the text (marking criteria *Structure and development of text* and *Academic style*). The feedback summaries commented on clarity in the assignment (25), need for more details (26) and reading easiness (27) as illustrated by the examples below.

- 25) **It might be good to avoid using 'products' and 'produce' very close together** in paragraph 2. [+ ve Appreciation:composition:complexity].
- 26) **This relationship could have been further enhanced by explaining the terms internal and external**. [- ve Appreciation:composition:complexity].
- 27) **Your use of the headings and bullet-pointed sub-headings made the report easy to read**. [+ ve Appreciation:composition:complexity].

*Appreciation:reaction:impact* is concerned with the emotive effect of the text or writing. It should be noted that some Appraisal scholars (e.g., Bednarek, 2008; Starfield et al., 2015) have treated this category as Covert Affect given that it invokes emotion as in (28) and (30) below. There were some instances of Reaction:impact in my data unlike in Starfield et al. (2015). The feedback described the assignment being *interesting* (28), (30) and *favourable* (29).

- 28) I found **it very interesting to read**. [+ ve Appreciation:reaction:impact].
- 29) The **overall impression is favourable**. [+ ve Appreciation:reaction:impact].
- 30) **It was most interesting for me to read**. [+ ve Appreciation:reaction:impact].

*Appreciation:reaction:quality* is related to how pleasing the assignment is in terms of the quality of the text or writing. The feedback summary often included words such as *excellent* (31), *professional* (32) and *good* (33) to describe the assignment. There were no

negative evaluations in this regard.

- 31) I also thought *the layout of your SWOT* was **excellent**. [+ ve Appreciation:reaction:quality].
- 32) *The assignment looks professional* [+ ve Appreciation:reaction:quality].
- 33) *the content* is **very good**. [+ ve Appreciation:reaction:quality].

*Appreciation:valuation:veracity* is concerned with the validity of argument and accuracy of information in the assignment (marking criteria *Use of source material* and *Structure and development of text*). The assessment feedback evaluated whether the assignment provided evidence and details from the case study for the argument (34), (35) and if the information provided was accurate (36).

- 34) *Your essay used evidence from the case study*. [+ ve Appreciation:valuation:veracity].
- 35) but *there* are **many generalisations** and **not enough detail** for your reader to understand the problems facing the business. [- ve Appreciation:valuation:veracity].
- 36) *everything discussed must be accurate and reliable*. [- ve Appreciation:valuation:veracity].

*Appreciation:valuation:propriety* refers to the (mis)interpretation of case study and the use of referencing and citations (marking criteria *Use of source materials*, *Academic style* and *Presentation*). In feedback summaries, the tutors commented on how well the assignment interpreted and transferred the information from the case study text (37), (38). Other evaluative language concentrated on referencing (39). All these are important in academic writing.

- 37) *Information from the source material* is **correct and appropriate** for the task. [+ ve Appreciation:valuation:propriety].
- 38) I have **also removed underlining** from parts of your work which **does not represent the key concepts in the source text**. [- ve Appreciation:valuation:propriety].
- 39) *it is important to include references for all the source texts in order to avoid plagiarism*. [- ve Appreciation:valuation:propriety].

The data revealed two other Appreciation sub-categories with a few instances: *Valuation:capacity* and *Valuation:tenacity*. Capacity is about the *ability* of the assignment text as in (40). Tenacity is about an aspect of text carefully or thoroughly following assignment guidelines as illustrated in (41).

- 40) *Your assignment showed* me that you had thought about how to structure the text to ensure that your paragraphing reflected the overall structure needed to write this summary. [+ ve Appreciation:valuation:capacity].
- 41) **perhaps careful reading of the guidance notes is needed**. [- ve Appreciation:valuation:tenacity].

#### 4.2.4. Affect: tutor emotional reactions to assignments

Affect is an important aspect of pedagogy, particularly in distance education. Due to the potential emotional impact of assessment feedback on students (Pitt & Norton, 2017; Yu & Liu, 2021), it is important to examine Affect in feedback although it is not directly related to the course marking criteria. Despite acknowledging its importance in the wider assessment feedback literature, it is under-researched and probably extremely scarcely examined from a linguistic perspective (cf. Starfield et al., 2015). Instances where the tutor or the dummy subject 'it' expressed emotions about the assignment or the student were coded as Affect. For this paper, the analysis of Affect was conducted drawing on the refined Affect system proposed by Bednarek (2008) and Ngo and Unsworth (2015) as the original by Martin and White (2005) seemed limited. Particularly, this was helpful to analyse Affect:(dis)inclination which had further subcategories of Fear and Desire, replaced with Non-desire and Desire respectively. All four sub-categories of Affect were found in the data: Dis/inclination, Dis/satisfaction, Un/happiness and In/security. While instances of the first three categories were high, the fourth one was found only in a few places.

*Affect:dis/satisfaction* relates to the tutor showing dis/satisfaction about the assignment or student in terms of their achievement or otherwise. Dis/satisfaction language appeared quite frequently in the feedback summaries. Often the tutor expressed it through words like *thanks* and *well done*. *Well done* could also mean Happiness. The language was almost always positive expressing pleasure (42), (43) except one instance (44). This overwhelmingly satisfactory language can be encouraging to distance learners.

- 42) **Thanks for** entering your details in a header, it's **much appreciated!** [+ ve Affect:satisfaction].
- 43) **Well done for referencing**. [+ ve Affect:satisfaction/happiness].
- 44) I **feel that your English needs a little bit of tidying up**. [- ve Affect:dissatisfaction].

*Affect:un/happiness* shows tutors being un/happy about the assignment or the student and their way of writing. They typically included congratulatory expressions such as *keep it up* and *well done*. Again, all instances were positive (cheer and affection) as below, thus potentially providing continuous motivation to students.

- 45) **Keep it up!** [+ ve Affect:happiness].
- 46) **Well done for all the hard work you've put into this TMA**. [+ ve Affect:happiness].
- 47) *Your assignment was a pleasure to read*. [+ ve Affect:happiness].

*Affect:inclination:non/desire* is expressed through the evaluative language when the tutor desires (or does not desire) something in the assignment or the student. This subcategory of Affect is based on the revised version proposed by Bednarek (2008) and Ngo and Unsworth (2015). All the instances in this category were positive except one. The tutors desired to see the student’s next assignment (48), their wellbeing (49), and wished them luck (50) and good progress (51). The tutor used the Non-desire language when they knew the student had gone through difficulties (52). The evaluative language in this category seemed to be about students’ well-being and progression.

- 48) I’ll **look forward to** *reading your next assignment*. [+ ve Affect:inclination:desire].
- 49) I **hope you are well** [+ ve Affect:inclination:desire].
- 50) **good luck for your next assignment**. [+ ve Affect:inclination:desire].
- 51) I **hope and expect you to live up to it!** [+ ve Affect:inclination:desire].
- 52) I **know** that *you* have had a **difficult time recently** [- ve Affect:disinclination:non-desire]. and it is **good to see that you have caught up with everything and achieved a very good mark**. [+ ve Affect:satisfaction; + ve Judgement:capacity:cognitive].

*Affect:in/security* is about expressing the feeling of in/security about assignment or student. There were only two instances of this. One was about the tutor showing (academic writing) confidence in the student (53) and the other was about the tutor reassuring the student of their marking practice as they were assisting another tutor to mark the assignment (54).

- 53) I **have a lot of confidence in you now** [+ ve Affect:security:confidence]
- 54) I am assisting [another tutor] with marking TMA2 assignments; **please don’t be concerned**, it is quite usual for tutors to assist each other in this way and will not disadvantage you. [+ ve Affect:security:trust].

### 4.3. Student perceptions of tutor assessment feedback

In this section, the analysis of the interviews with eight students about their views on assessment feedback is presented. Before presenting these findings, the assessment scores of the interviewee students are provided in Fig. 5 to contextualise their meaning-making of assessment feedback. As can be seen, six of the interviewed students (all pseudonyms) secured higher scores on the second assignment although factors influencing this may be several other than the feedback only.

The interview focused on the actual tutor feedback on assignments. For this, both the student and the interviewer had the feedback summaries in hand during the interview. They were asked how much they could make sense of the evaluative nature of the tutor feedback. Most of them reported that they understood the tutor feedback provided on each assignment and knew why they were awarded a certain mark for the assignment. For example, Dave thought the tutor feedback was ‘pretty straightforward’:

#### Extract 1

In general, the feedback you get from the tutor is pretty straightforward. The feedback I’ve had it’s not really been overly in depth but I guess that’s in a way quite a good thing because it means obviously that I’m on the right track so there’s not too much feedback.

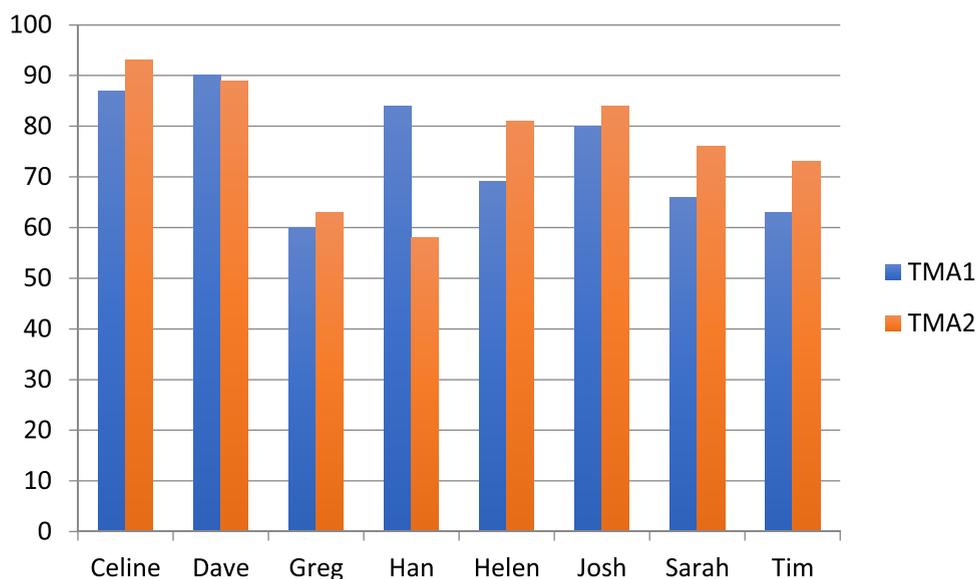


Fig. 5. Interview participants’ assessment scores.

On the other hand, a few students did not fully understand some of the tutor feedback when the feedback was not explained or exemplified. This was a case when students received a low mark with little explanation or advice on how to improve the next assignment. For instance, Celine did not find it helpful when her tutor did not explain why she lost marks and what she could do differently in future assignments:

Extract 2

I guess it's hard sometimes to know where I lost certain marks so it's quite good to get ... 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. [emphasis added].

The participants were also asked whether the feedback on the first assignment helped with writing the second one and to explain how the students made use of the feedback. Most of the students felt that the feedback helped them with writing the second assignment to some extent. This experience was, however, varied among the participants. For example, some students found the feedback on the first assignment relevant and significantly helpful as illustrated by Extracts 3–4:

Extract 3

A very good thing about the feedback is that it goes exactly hand in hand with whichever was the initial advice from the tutor before the TMA. My tutor for instance provides a list of things to look out for or to just watch out for when you're submitting the TMA and once you have done this you find actually that his feedback after you have submitted the TMA reflects exactly the initial remarks. (Han)

Extract 4

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]. (Sarah)

On the other hand, some students reported that they did not think the evaluative nature of the feedback on the first assignment helped with writing the second assignment as illuminated by Extracts 5 and 6 below.

Extract 5

I don't think there was too much from the first one. [...] But yeah, I think the main point from the first one was to order the information rather than just talk about it as it came into my head. So I think I had a bit more structure in the second TMA than I did in the first. (Celine)

Extract 6

Again, it's the summary was ... I found it quite an easy task [...] The trouble I had with this one is it says, you know, "For the next assignments you'll want to use argued points" They give you information feedback for the first TMA, which is great, which is a summary, but because the next TMA isn't a summary, some of the information is not relevant, if that makes sense? (Dave)

These two students' comments suggest two things. Firstly, both felt that the feedback was not as meaningful and relevant to the second assignment as it could be. Therefore, they did not seem to see the feedback on the first assignment having real formative values and probably did not engage with or enact the assessment feedback (Sadler, 1989). Secondly, their comments indicate that the first assignment was quite different to the second one because of which the feedback on the first one was not meaningful to the student although the tutors could adapt their assessment feedback to help with the second assignment even if it were only setting tutor expectations.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper contributes to the body of literature on writing assessment feedback in higher education. To date, research in this area has focused on the content analysis of feedback and rarely paid attention to its linguistic analysis. To address this gap, this study deployed the *Appraisal framework* (Martin & White, 2005) within SFL to analyse the evaluative language used by tutors in the feedback provided to open and distance business management students' academic writing assignments and additionally examined students' perceptions about the evaluative nature of the actual feedback received. It showed how tutors used evaluative language in their assessment feedback through a fine-grained analysis of the linguistic resources of *Attitude* within the Appraisal framework. The linguistic perspective adopted by this paper has enabled the researcher to understand and analyse feedback meaningfully from a novel angle hitherto unexplored at the undergraduate level and in distance education (cf. Starfield et al., 2015).

In response to the first research question, this study mapped the *occluded* genre (Swales, 2004) of assessment feedback summary, a topic underexplored to date (see Starfield et al., 2015). It showed its private nature and many variations regarding generic stages amongst the feedback summaries by different tutors. However, it demonstrated that there are four common *stages* of this genre used by

the tutors: Orientation^ Feedback^ Recommendations^ Closing.

Regarding the second research question, three categories of *Attitude* (Judgement, Appreciation and Affect including their sub-categories) language in the feedback were examined to understand the nature of the evaluative language used. It provided a more fine-grained analysis of the assessment feedback than a mere content analysis (e.g., Walker, 2009). This linguistic analysis demonstrated that the most widely used attitudinal evaluative language, albeit mostly positive, is *Judgement* of the student's writing behaviours rather than the *Appreciation* of student assessment texts or academic writing. The focus on the student rather than the assignment may have been due to the tutor's need to communicate with students directly in distance learning in which student-tutor interaction is limited and feedback serves teaching purposes as well (Chetwynd & Dobbyn, 2011). The feedback summaries also included tutors' positive Affect language (though not necessarily related to the marking criteria), showing their feelings towards the students or their assignment and thus building a good relationship with their students which were rare in Starfield et al. (2015). This aspect in feedback is scarcely investigated despite their importance for student self-esteem as highlighted by previous studies (Forsythe & Johnson, 2017; Pitt & Norton, 2017; Yu & Liu, 2021). As there are no other studies like this one, my findings on Judgement and Appreciation can only be compared with Starfield et al. (2015) which showed a similar high occurrence of Judgement in the PhD examiner reports and thus this study supports their findings.

The third research question was about student perceptions of feedback on their assignments by their tutors. The findings showed that the students generally found the tutor feedback useful and meaningful although some feedback was obscure or less meaningful to them especially when it lacked an explanation for the loss of marks or there was no direct relevance of the feedback to the subsequent assignment. These mixed student perceptions seem dependent on types of assessment feedback (praise, suggest, corrections, etc.) similar to those found in Yu et al. (2020). This finding suggests that tutors need to be careful and use specific evaluative language following the marking criteria in their assessment feedback to avoid any confusion and irrelevance (cf. Hyland & Hyland, 2001).

This study has some limitations too. First, it is an initial study and thus there is a need for a large corpus-based one required to validate the findings. Second, due to space, this study did not examine the other two systems of Appraisal - *Engagement* and *Graduation* - which could provide further insights into *dialogicity* and *intensity* of evaluative language in assessment feedback. Third, this study excluded tutors' in-script comments in the assignment for consistency as some tutors made only a few comments. Future studies could include them especially if Engagement or feedback dialogue is to be examined.

This study has several implications. Firstly, all tutors providing writing assessment feedback to students should be aware of how they deploy evaluative language and position themselves in their feedback so that the focus of the evaluation remains to be about the assignment rather than the student. Secondly, this study methodologically showed the successful application of the Appraisal framework (Martin & White, 2005) to analysing assessment feedback which other researchers can draw on, a response to Mao and Lee's (2020) call for diverse research methods. Finally, there should be more research examining the language of assessment feedback, possibly comparing two or more disciplines (cf. Fernández-Toro, Truman, & Walker, 2013). On its own, however, the study serves as an important first step on the use of SFL in examining the language of writing assessment feedback in (distance) higher education and complements other approaches to examining assessment feedback.

## Data Availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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## Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at [doi:10.1016/j.asw.2022.100664](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2022.100664).

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