

COUNTING THE WORDS THAT COUNT – USING A LEXICAL ANALYSIS TOOL TO EXPLORE FEEDBACK TO STUDENT TEACHERS

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Introduction

In teacher education, the teaching practice is generally regarded as a central part of the process of becoming a teacher and it is a widely-researched area. One of aspects that has attracted research is the study of the language used in the post lesson observation conference between the student teacher and the mentor or university tutor. Conversational Analysis is generally the approach adopted to sift through the complexity of these face-to-face meetings.

Far less researched is the study of the written feedback given to student teachers and yet, this feedback, by virtue of its permanence as a mode of communication, deserves analysis not least because it is a resource that the student teacher can refer to at a later moment following the post-observation conference. Studies that looked at written feedback focussed on logic and substance of discourse between university supervisors and student teachers (Zeichner & Liston 1985), features, style, and ways of giving advice and signalling progress (Spear et al 1997), the linguistic characteristics of written supervision feedback reports (Glenwright 1999), what student teachers consider to be the most useful processing tool for reflection (Smith & Lev-Ari 2005), the most effective forms of feedback according to student teachers (White 2007), the content of the feedback (Akcan & Tatar 2010), using critical discourse to capitalize on opportunities to develop adaptive teaching expertise (Soslau 2012), among others.

Mainly from the studies above and from other studies that focus on feedback, including that given by university tutors, some categories of types of feedback have been proposed. Feedback has been categorized as factual, prudential, justificatory and critical discourse (Zeichner & Liston 1985), as authoritative advice and cooperative advice (Spear et al 1997), as expressing approval, expressing reservations or criticism, and giving advice or directives (Glenwright 1999), as confirmatory or corrective (Kurtoglu-Hooton 2004, following Egan 2002) as descriptive, questioning, evaluative and advisory (Burton et al 2002), and as reflection, direction, evaluative and relational (Farr 2007) among other categorizations.

The differences tend to be of preferred terminology rather than distinctions, and there is a great deal of overlap among the terms. However, a study that stands out for its methodology is Farr's (2007) study that reaches conclusions about categories of feedback by using corpus linguistics to analyse the post-observation feedback.

Background

The context of this study is somewhat particular as this ITE university-based degree course is still in the process of establishing partnerships with schools and setting up mentoring support systems despite being in existence since 1981. In the absence of a school mentor, the level of support that student teachers can expect on their field placement varies widely because there are no specifically chosen or trained teachers as mentors. There is a cooperating teacher whose role is not described and the support they give could range from minimal to highly valued (Smith & Spiteri 2013). The reasons for this are many and varied but it is beyond the scope of this study to explore here. The upshot is, however, that the university tutor or supervisor is the only point of reference for the student teachers. It is they who observe lessons and hold post-observation conferences and write reports.

The teaching practice lasts six weeks and four unannounced visits take place, carried out by two university tutors. A visit normally consists of one observed lesson (around 40 or 45 minutes) followed by a conference (around 30 minutes) between the student teacher and the university tutor only, on site at the school. This could take place immediately following the observed lesson or later in the day, at university, if the student teacher is teaching again, or if the university tutor has other visits to conduct.

Guiding the post-observation session is a one-page pro forma in the form of a checklist of competences and a list of criteria organized around three themes: Planning and Preparation, the Teaching and Learning process – the lesson, and Communication, Classroom Management and other Professional qualities. Under each heading is a list of indicators further expounding on the

headings and a system of ticking off on a three-point descriptive scale of Marginal, Satisfactory, and Unsatisfactory. In addition, a lined page is available for a qualitative, discursive response on the observed lesson and any other related aspects identified by the tutor as necessitating comment. The two strike a balance between the need for structure and standardization among all the university tutors, and open-ended comments that allow the tutors to respond freely to the particularities of the situation. This document, in the shape of a booklet, is retained by the student teacher; on occasions when the tutor cannot complete the report on site, it is returned to the student teacher as expediently as possible. It is this written feedback that is analysed in this study.

The linguistic context of this study is a bilingual one which sees both university tutors and student teachers using English as a second language. It is also a language teacher education programme and the student teachers for whom the reports were written, were all prospective teachers of English at secondary school level. There are very likely implications of this in terms of how the student teachers read the reports in a second language, however this was not measured or even explored in this study, save for the fact that the university tutor concerned was aware that the linguistic code mediated the message. In bilingual situations the value of a written record that could serve to clarify the oral feedback has been noted (Bunton et al 2002).

The data

The data consists of a total of 18 feedback reports given to 18 students during their field placement carried out in the spring of 2014. The reports were typed out to permit linguistic analyses using a lexical analysis tool – WordSmith (Scott 2004). *The tool is an integrated suite of programs for looking at how words behave in texts* (Scott 2014). The data input resulted in a small corpus of tutor written feedback of 7,577 words (excluding the feedback report template so that the reoccurrence of the words there will not distort the frequencies).

Additionally, a manual qualitative analysis followed that analysed the units of feedback according to categories found in the literature. For the purpose of the analysis, a unit was considered to be a sentence or more, that dwelt on one issue. I purposefully avoided parsing the data into chunks that were either descriptive or evaluative or advisory as this would skew the thrust of the feedback being given. Consequently, a chunk of feedback that focussed on one issue and possibly contained diverse elements was considered as one unit of feedback. The two sorts of analyses - corpus and qualitative - were intended to complement each other and drive each other: the frequency counts, for example, served to identify patterns which led to a closer look at the data. The manual categorization then drove linguistic analyses such as concordances which served to identify other patterns of language usage.

In the first chart (Figure 1), the variation in length is immediately apparent and this prompted a closer look at the data. Length was found to correlate highly with the nature of the feedback: when the feedback is typically corrective together with advice, the length increases, generally due to the advice. The more striking shortest feedback report was in response to contextual factors: the student teacher was feeling very unwell and although the observation and feedback took place, the extenuating circumstances were taken into consideration.

A manual analysis of the 18 written feedback reports resulted in the following two broad functional categories of confirmatory and corrective feedback (Egan 2002) together with another category in which confirmatory comments were followed by corrective comments (Figures 2 & 3).

How something is said is as important as what is said and meaning is signalled by particular choices of words (Stubbs 1996). Corpus analysis allows the identification of patterns and use of language which will further describe the linguistic choices made by this teacher educator.

Figure 1. Length of written feedback reports for all students in 2003 and 2014.

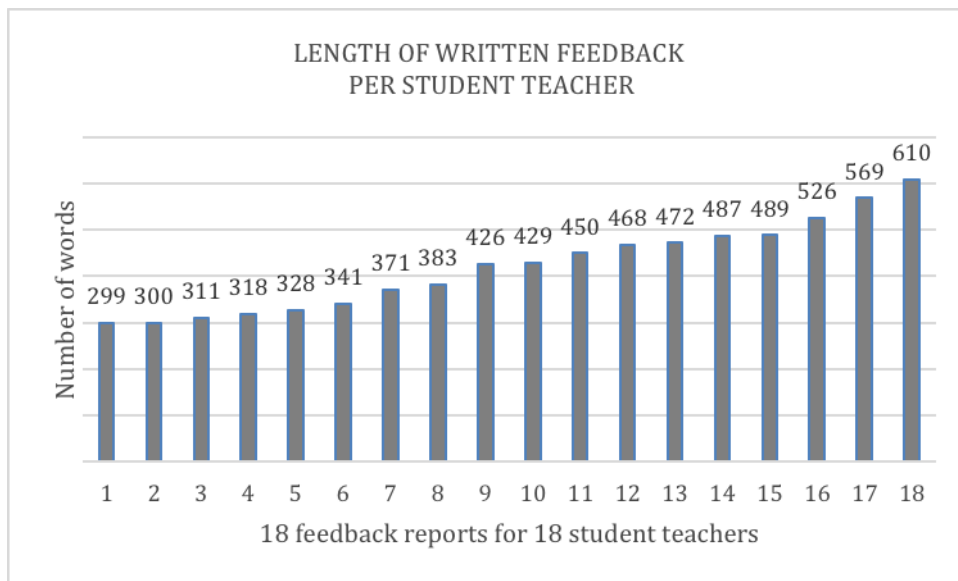
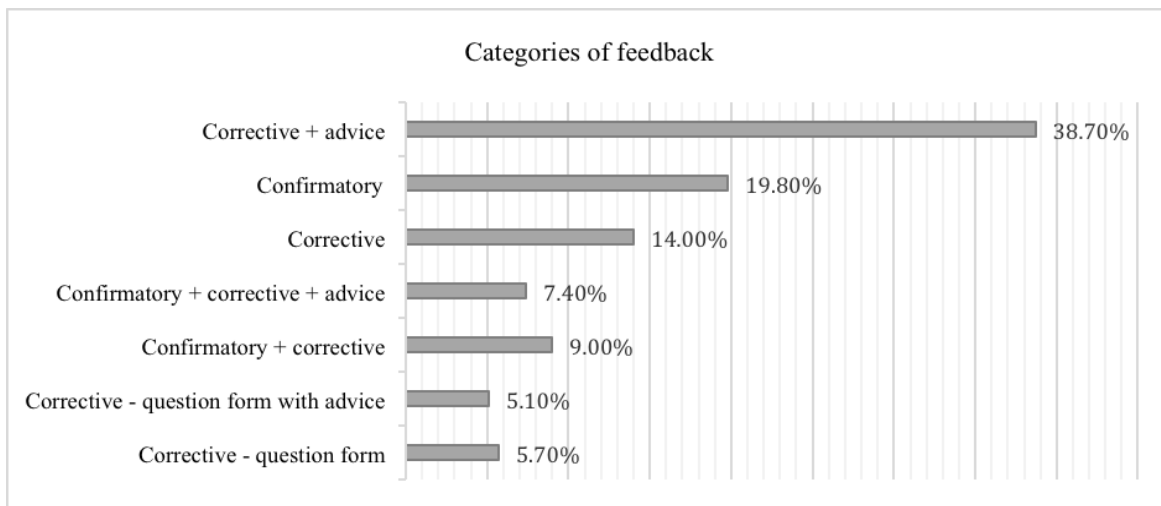


Figure 2.

| Confirmatory 19.8% | Corrective 63.5% | Confirmatory + corrective 16.4% |
|-----------------------|--|------------------------------------|
| Confirmatory | Corrective Corrective + advice Corrective in question form Corrective in question form + advice | Confirmatory + corrective + advice |

Figure 3. These are further subdivided into other related categories in the chart below.



Most frequently used words

A statistical analysis that is afforded by using a lexical analysis tool such as Wordsmith (Scott 2012) is the computation of keywords in a data set. This is carried out for the purpose of identifying how often words appear in one’s data when compared to a larger corpus. The results show which words stand out in the corpus under study and which consequently characterize that corpus. The British National Corpus Baby Edition of four million words was chosen (in Wordsmith)

against which to compare my data and the top 50 keywords (Figure 4) indicate the flavour of the data as quite clearly pertaining to the domain of teaching and learning.

Confirmatory feedback

It is widely accepted that feedback – whether spoken or written - should have elements that are positive and negative. Indeed, student teachers have been reported as expecting evaluation and to

be told clearly what they were strong in and what needed improving (Bunton et al 2002; Copland
Figure 4. Top 50 keywords.

| | |
|-------------------|----------------|
| 1. STUDENTS | 26. ANSWERS |
| 2. LESSON | 27. COURSEBOOK |
| 3. YOUR | 28. PLAN |
| 4. YOU | 29. QUESTIONS |
| 5. WHITEBOARD | 30. LESSONS |
| 6. STUDENT | 31. CORRECT |
| 7. CLASS | 32. TO |
| 8. LISTENING | 33. DO |
| 9. ACTIVITY | 34. CORRECTION |
| 10. WORK | 35. EXERCISE |
| 11. VOCABULARY | 36. IWB |
| 12. EVALUATIONS | 37. ALSO |
| 13. COMPREHENSION | 38. WRITING |
| 14. NOT | 39. OUTCOMES |
| 15. LEARNING | 40. RECORD |
| 16. TEACHING | 41. SPEAKING |
| 17. TASK | 42. HANDOUT |
| 18. SCHEME | 43. WORKSHEET |
| 19. HW | 44. ARE |
| 20. READING | 45. PROFILES |
| 21. LEARNERS | 46. TP |
| 22. ASK | 47. ANSWER |
| 23. OBJECTIVES | 48. USEFUL |
| 24. GOOD | 49. FOCUS |
| 25. INSTRUCTIONS | 50. VLE |

2008). The corpus allowed me to see that the 30 uses of the word 'good' – typically associated with praise - actually shrank to 21, as 9 times out of 30 it was not used positively, for example: *Do make good use of the self-evaluation questions...* However, a search for 3-word clusters among the confirmatory feedback gave seven results, the top five of which were all variants of *you do well, you did well, you do well to* showing that praise was being expressed in various linguistic forms.

Related to praise are the pronouns *you* and *your* which feature among the top 5 key words. On average, *you* is used over 5 times per student teacher while *your* featured twice in every report indicating a very direct address to the student teacher. Typically, praise or confirmation of good practice using *you* and *your* appears as:

You are doing well and your commitment and care is evidenced in your lesson.

Your Learning Outcomes are generally well expressed (5th March 2.123) but at times you undersell your lesson in the sense that you achieve more than is described in the learning outcomes.

Corrective feedback

Corrective feedback in all its forms - whether modified with advice or in question form or purely corrective with implied advice - amounts to 63% of the units of feedback, or over 71% if one adds the corrective comments that are part of a confirmatory-plus-corrective comment.

Undoubtedly, this is the most sensitive part of the written feedback for student teachers and it is intended to help them adopt different practices or adapt current practices so they teach in ways that match the expected competencies in the pro formas and assessment criteria.

It must be remembered that this study looks at written feedback in isolation from the spoken feedback which are often complementary in function. The written feedback contains little phatic discourse, is largely evaluative in nature and scores low on encouraging reflective thinking partly because of the monologic mode (Farr 2007).

Analyses of this data show that the style and content match that reported in the literature. Farr (2007) found that written feedback was strongly

directional in function and direct in style. For style, compare the following example:

Tape quality was poor. This had a negative effect at this level, especially. Check before use. (Farr 2007)

with:

Also, do not ask for definitions of vocab; instead ask for examples, opposites, what the object is used for etc. (own data).

In terms of function, part of the purpose of feedback is to support and guide student teachers by giving advice and alternative ways of teaching more effectively. Of 215 units of corrective feedback, 70% came with advice and in many instances of the rest of the corrective feedback, the advice was implied as in the following: *By this stage [of the lesson], we seem to have lost the holiday theme. The sentence on the IWB weren't all related to holidays.*

What linguistic choices were made to express meaning? The use of the imperative featured in the analysis, both in the affirmative and negative forms through the occurrence of *do* or *do not*; also, several other verbs were used in the imperative form as will be shown below. Modals also featured mainly through *could*, *would*, and *should*. This is explained in greater detail in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Imperative forms and advisory forms.

| | | |
|----------------------------------|----------------|---------------------|
| add, adopt, alter, ask, | consider, | It is advisable to |
| avoid, be, be sure to, | could , | It's best not to |
| beam up, beef up, | need to | It's necessary to |
| break up, change, | reconsider, | It is not enough to |
| check, clarify, | reflect on, | It is useful to |
| consolidate, date, | rethink, | It is useful to |
| distinguish, do, do not , | should | It's best to |
| elaborate, explain, | | It's useful to |
| exploit, form, go, guide, | | It's useful to |
| include, indicate, | | |
| involve, keep present, | | |
| learn, let, lower, move, | | |
| move forwards, must, | | |
| really must, offer, | | |
| organize, pair off, plan, | | |
| prepare, put, revise, | | |
| say, see, show, spend, | | |
| teach, think, treat, try, | | |
| use, vary, watch, | | |
| work on, write down | | |

Modal items such as *could* and *could have*, *should* and *need(ed)* were among the items that appeared more frequently in this small dataset, and they

seem a little less severe than the other verbs in the imperative form. The function of these modal auxiliaries to talk about situations that are different from what actually happened, combined with a closer examination of the data reveals that I am offering solutions and different scenarios to the student teachers as alternative ways of teaching to the ones observed. Similarly, the use of *could* attests to proposals of other ways of being and doing that student teachers could consider. At times however, the use of the imperative to give direction is further bolstered by the intensifier *really* as in:

You really needed to conclude and wrap up the lesson and consolidate the teaching point.

The whole class approach really did not work.

You really must approach this very differently and Penny Ur's book is helpful here.

The use of *need to/needed* to generally served the function of giving advice.

Inasmuch as written reports encourage reflection - and studies have shown this to be little - some verbs encouraging some form of reflection can be found in the data as shown in the second column. Some examples of units of feedback encouraging reflection:

Consider first using the visuals silently while pairs of students prepare their answers and then have a quick assessment check, whole class.

Reflect on your management strategies; no need to escalate to a reprimand - go through stages first as I explained to you.

Please reconsider how to deal with students' difficulties. Supplying the answers yourself is NOT the way to go about it. Involve the other students - ask them if they know the answer to the other student's difficulty. This is more effective on all counts.

The third column lists all the examples of advice using a far less direct approach than addressed the student teacher, and opting for the neutral, passive, such as:

Also, when a student answers, it's useful to offer that answer for another student to confirm or query. This involves more students.

When taking answers from students, it's best to stand next to the student who is furthest AWAY so that the speaker raises her voice for you (and all the class) to hear.

Contrast this with an identical piece of advice (below) on the same issue, this time using the

imperative negative form; it comes across as harsher and more forceful:

*Do take up the advice I gave during my first visit: **do not stand** close to the student speaking because she will not raise her voice for all to hear.*

In terms of the frequency of use of the imperative, modal, and advisory forms discussed above, the following data is available in Figure 6:

Figure 6. Frequency of use.

| | All 18 reports |
|-----------------------|----------------|
| need to /needed to | 24 |
| could/could have | 23 |
| would/would have | 19 |
| should | 18 |
| do not | 17 |
| I think | 15 |
| really | 14 |
| do | 12 |
| consider | 9 |
| must | 9 |
| reflect on | 4 |
| please | 4 |
| rethink | 1 |
| should not | 1 |
| I strongly advise you | 1 |

The use of *I think* indicates preference for stating a personal viewpoint rather than an authoritative statement. It could also be signalling that the university tutor is making a suggestion given that some aspects of the dynamics of a class are often hidden to the outsider.

Conclusion

In this study I set out to systematically reflect on the linguistic options I made in my practice as a university tutor when writing post observation feedback to student teachers. The creation of a mini corpus allowed the systematic exploration of the textual data. Statistical analysis, coupled with a qualitative consideration of the feedback, made for a more round understanding of the data. The university tutor who is busy going round schools observing lessons and writing feedback virtually simultaneously while giving verbal feedback, is not in an enviable position. The linguistic choices made in these conditions have an effect on what is essentially a delicate situation between student teacher and university tutor. By stopping to systematically analyse these linguistic choices, it is

hoped that the quality of the process could subsequently improve if necessary so that the types of feedback that student teachers have expressed a preference for - suggestions, advice, areas for improvement, praise, and encouragement (Bunton et al 2002) - are achieved.

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