



# Teachers' written feedback comments on narrative texts in Elementary and Secondary Education

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## ABSTRACT

One of the most widespread practices in compulsory education is the annotation of feedback messages by teachers on texts written by students. The aim of this paper is to describe the nature of these types of teachers' responses, in order establish possible profiles of assessment practices in Elementary and Secondary Education, as well as to identify which aspects of writing a story are considered more important in writing assessment.

An analysis was made of 10,585 assessment messages which 41 schoolteachers in Elementary and Compulsory Secondary Education wrote on short stories composed by 393 students from various schools. The assessment notes were categorized according to code, place, extension, assessment content, and implicit meta-linguistic content.

Findings reveal the predominance of direct correction of specific spelling and grammar mistakes. The frequency of these corrections is, additionally, the best predictor of the global grade given by the teacher for the composition. Therefore, we conclude that teachers of compulsory education approach assessment of narrative texts from a conception which places excessive emphasis on more local and superficial aspects of the composition in detriment of other semantic, rhetorical or pragmatic aspects. Some teachers, however, mostly in Secondary Education, also recorded non-corrective assessment content, such as markings, questions, suggestions for expansion, or justifications. Certain assessment patterns are evident, which combine other types of evaluation (semantic-organizational, or superficial).

Finally, the limitations and implications of those results toward teacher training are discussed.

## 1. Introduction

Traditionally, the teaching of writing skills has not received the recognition it deserves within the school curriculum. This assertion has been supported by many authors for more than half a century (see Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, & Rosen, 1975). Particularly, they have criticized that the writing activities in the classroom have been excessively focused toward a final assessment, in which students are not offered the opportunity to benefit from the examiners' comments in order to produce better texts (Applebe, Langer, & Mullis, 1987).

It is widely known that assessment comments made by teachers on written compositions is a fundamental didactic resource for improving written competence (Ferris, 2014; Jølle, 2014; Tee Pei, 2014). Most students believe that feedback can help them. However, the feedback they consider to be most useful is not always the most effective to improve their learning and vice versa (Leijen, 2017).

Feedback varies between teachers in terms of its quantity, focus, style and effectiveness (Hyland, 2013). In addition, there is no

agreement about what type of feedback is most useful and why (Nelson & Schunn, 2009).

It has been shown that corrective feedback from teacher and classmates has a significant effect in improving the drafts of a short story (Authors, 2014; Cho & MacArthur, 2010). In considering whether the student has improved his/her writing competence, it is necessary, however, to assess productions other than successive corrections of the same story (Bitchener, 2008; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Ferris, 2010; Truscott, 2004).

Despite the fact that teachers very frequently write assessment feedback on their students' texts (Hyland & Hyland, 2006), they recognize that they have little training in this strategy (Crusan, Plakans, & Gebril, 2016), finding out several difficulties while they are writing comments (Bruno & Santos, 2010). Some studies in this respect have attempted to document the various assessment practices carried out by teachers when assessing their students' texts, both in their mother tongue (2004, Ferris, 2004; Truscott, 1996), and in L2 (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Paulus, 1999), relative to feedback content or its

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formal aspects.

With regard to *assessment content*, the difference between direct or explicit feedback, and indirect or implicit feedback, has been researched. In the former, the teacher identifies and corrects the mistake, while in the latter the teacher identifies the mistake (e.g. by underlining it), but does not provide an alternative or correction (Ferris, 1995; Nelson & Schunn, 2009). Most teachers prefer the direct type of feedback (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Ferris, 2014; Lee, 2007). There are, however, several studies in an L2 context which cast doubts on the usefulness of this type of feedback, which does not require subsequent revision by the student (Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986). Jamalinesari, Rahimi, Gowhary, and Azizifar, (2015), for example, conclude that students who receive indirect feedback, i.e. that intended to help them correct their own mistakes, improve to a greater extent their compositions from a grammatical point of view compared to those who receive direct feedback.

Other studies have analyzed grade valence, positive or negative, which all assessment feedback entails (Tunstall & Gipps, 1996). Dragga (1986) analyzed 864 comments that teachers made on 40 student compositions. Only 6% of those praised some aspect of the composition, while 94% of comments focused on pointing out the mistakes. Similar results were obtained at different stages of the education system by other researchers (Daiker, 1983; Harris, 1977), highlighting the fact that teachers tend to place more emphasis on the negative aspects in student compositions (Daiker, 1989). Although the results do not always concur (Ferris, 1997; Tseng & Tsai, 2006), overall it would appear that emphasis on praise does not have a positive effect on improving writing (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).

With respect to *meta-textual content*, feedback can focus on semantic aspects of a text, its rhetorical organization, syntactic and grammatical expression of sentences, vocabulary, or spelling. From a survey carried out on 129 Primary and Secondary teachers, Ferris (2014) found that 27% made suggestions and comments about the ideas included in the text, 1% about rhetorical organization, 2% about linguistic-grammatical questions, and 61% combined comments relating globally to all these aspects. However, other studies based on the observation of comments made by teachers show a predominance of linguistic and grammatical corrections: most of all correcting words and commas; spelling mistakes and mechanical errors; and also mistakes in sentence structure, pronoun agreement, and the use of capital letters (Lunsford & Lunsford, 2008). These results are in line with those of well-known studies, which concluded that most teachers focus their attention on the most superficial aspects of the texts (Anson, 1989; Johnson, 1917; Witty & Green, 1930).

Finally, with regard to the *formal aspects* of feedback, studies have mainly analyzed variables related with code, place (where written on the text) and extension of the assessment comments. Connors and Lunsford (1988), 1993 found that most teachers prefer to make general comments at the end of the composition, along with the score. Conversely, other teachers prefer to write the general comments at the beginning of the composition, probably with the intention that students focus their attention on those comments from the beginning. Teachers generally write those comments by hand and in colors over the compositions of their students, drawing red circles around the mistakes that students should pay more attention to (Lunsford & Lunsford, 2008).

Some studies have distinguished between errors which are not linked to any specific element, and codified errors, in which the exact location of the error is marked (Jamalinesari et al., 2015). Ferris (2014) reported that 79% of teachers had no preference for comments in the margin or comments at the end, and that they normally used a combination of both. Other studies have focused more on extension. Therefore feedback can be specific or local, when it affects only words, sentences or small fragments of the text, or global, when it refers to the overall construction of the text (Miller, 2003; Olson & Raffeld, 1987).

The studies we have just described offer a global perspective of the type of assessment messages that teachers record on students'

compositions. This research has been undertaken mostly by means of quasi-experimental designs or questionnaires. Observational studies deal only with some of the dimensions outlined above. It is necessary to carry out more observational studies reporting with reliability and precision the types of assessment comments which teachers actually put into practice in the classroom, as well as differences between teachers with regard to type of text, educational level of the students, or their own assessment conceptions.

The observational studies we have just reviewed have analyzed three types of feedback: indirect, corrective, and grading. However, other types of evaluative content have not been identified, such as questions about the intention of certain text fragment, suggestions of expansion or improvement without correction, or the justification of certain corrections. A more complete description of the different types of evaluative comments could help to better understand how teachers of different levels of education approach the assessment of writing skills. In particular, it would help to understand to which extent this assessment, beyond grading and correcting mistakes, could potentially involve the student in a process of revision of writing, i.e. in a reflection on their mistakes and the alternatives of improvement.

The studies reviewed offer little information about the thought processes and implicit concepts of teachers regarding the assessment of writing skills. The correlation analysis between the metalinguistic content of the assessment comments and the grades given by teachers might offer relevant information as to what teachers consider more or less important in the writing of a text at each level of education. The comparison between this assessment and the results of two standardized test of writing assessment, as well as the assessment criteria of the official school curriculum, might also be useful to identify the difference of concepts between teachers, researchers and lawmakers.

The aims of the present study, therefore, are the following. First, we want to describe and classify, with regard to the various types of formal and content criteria, assessment comments as feedback used by teachers when correcting narrative texts. Second, we try to establish possible profiles of assessment practices in Elementary and Secondary Education. Finally, we intend to analyze which aspects of writing a text have more impact on the assessment of narrative skills made by teachers at different levels of education. In order to do that, we will analyze the concurrent validity of global marks given by teachers to compositions, and the type of feedback which best predicts the score. We will also compare these scores with those obtained when applying the standardized tests criteria to the same texts.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The participants in this study were divided into two different samples: on the one hand 41 teachers from 14 schools located in different cities in Extremadura. Nineteen teachers taught in Compulsory Secondary Education (10 women and 9 men), and the remaining 22 were Elementary Education teachers (15 women and 7 men). All teachers had at least 5 years' teaching experience in the subject area of Spanish Language and Literature. On the other hand, 393 students between 10 and 15 years, all of whom belonged to different state and private schools in Extremadura. The selection of teachers and students followed a convenience sampling process.

We sought and gained appropriate ethical approval for this study. At all time, the teachers were informed, and they consented to participate and provide information about their written feedback. Total confidentiality was assured.

### 2.2. Materials

The stories which the teachers reviewed using assessment messages were written on a blank sheet with sufficient space for the students to

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